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Issue #1

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Artwork by Ann Larimer

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editorial

There's a lot that can be said about *Forever Knight*. It's a series that explores the human condition in all of its facets, from the inside . . . and the outside. The nobility, the tragedy, the drama, and the comedy of mortality can be a vast well of raw material.

But there are limitations to series television (yes, even on cable). Sometimes our investigations are too whispery to make an hour of entertainment, others too far beyond the confines of a continuing series. This poses a problem to our infinite imaginations.

Which is why you're holding this zine. Some of the fiction is lighter of heart or in tone—these are the daydreams. Other pieces are dark fancies, trips into the scarier, nightmare side of the twilight zone. But they all start with the same series and travel on the wings of 'what if' in search of blue skies or thunderclouds.

For the cover and the internal art, I have the priviledge of thanking Ann Larimer, who is enduring my current bout of madness with outstanding patience and civility (it really can't last *that* much longer). She has once again done the impossible (managing creativity on a deadline from hell) and I can't thank her enough for arting for my sake.

As for the fiction--several of these pieces have seen print on the Internet FK-Fic mailing list and Sharon Scott's "Back to Normal," is my one of my favorites. I think it's both charming and delightful in it's presentation—complete and satisfying in all senses of the word. I also have the honor of printing Sharon Himmanen's "Be Careful What You Wish For," which presents a disturbing alternate version of the events of *Dark Knight II* and which has never been posted (because Sharon's a bit of a wuss about this writing thing). Two other stories that haven't been posted are part of a 'party favor' set—but more on those in the editorial on the other side of this book.

And maybe that should be addressed, too—why this zine looks like it was put together by a deranged typesetter (well, it *was*, but that's beside the point). We thought we'd make it easier for you. If you need a bit of light-hearted entertainment or cheering up, wander through a few of our *Daydreams*. But we caution you, try not to read too many *Knightmares* before bedtime . . . .

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MORTAL WAYS AND MIRACLE PLAYS

By Susan M. Garrett

STARING AT the television, Nick was only dimly aware of the ringing phone. For a moment there was nothing but the wide screen, the roar of the crowd as the center forward deftly eluded a defender and the puck whizzed across the ice, toward the goalie.

The message on his answering machine kicked in and Nick held up his hand absently as if to ward off the message, attention still centered on the screen. The deafening shouts of the crowd nearly drowned out the announcer's joyful pronouncement of "He scores!"

"A hat trick," he murmured in disbelief, as the announcer echoed his words, although in more exuberant terms. Of course, it wasn't his team who had just scored their third consecutive goal in the first twenty minute period.

"—I really need your help," said the voice on the machine. "Nick, as soon as you get back—"

His mind identified the owner of the voice, and the urgency the tone implied at just about the same time. It was Myra Schanke. Nick backed away from the television screen, still watching in disbelief as the camera panned to the rink, which was covered with baseball caps.

Wonderful. A hat trick on 'Hat Day' at the rink. It would take them a half hour to clear the ice before play could resume.

Picking up the phone, he said, "Myra? This is Nick—I'm sorry, what can I do—?"

"Nick, thank God! I'm at my wit's end."

Any residual interest in the game faded at the desperation in her voice. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's Don—"

In the background, Nick's sensitive hearing managed to pick up the sounds of . . . well, if it had been six hundred years earlier, he would have identified the noise as two armored combatants hacking away at one another's shields with broadswords. "Myra? What's going on? What's he done?"

Then he heard Schanke's voice, from a distance. "Myra, have you seen—?"

"Hang on." Her voice was muffled, meaning that she'd covered the receiver with her hand as she called, "Don, I'm on the PHONE. Just wait a minute." Then she returned, her voice softer, almost a whisper. "He's driving me nuts. Nick, if you can't get over here, I don't know what I'm gonna do to that man."

Nick's eyes went back to the wide screen. The telecasters were now interviewing players. It would be a while before the ice was cleared and he could catch the rest of the period at Schanke's house if he had to. "It's okay, Myra. I'll be right over. But what's—?"

There was another bellow from Schanke. "Myra?!"

"Gotta go, Nick. You're a life-saver. Thanks. Bye."

The phone clicked and her voice was replaced by a dial tone. Bemused, Nick stared at the receiver in his hand, then dropped it onto the cradle. Picking up the remote, he turned off the television, then tossed the control onto the couch as he headed for the door. If he hurried, he'd might just make the rest of the first period.

Not that it mattered. Who'd ever heard of a hat trick in the first period of a play-off game?

But his mind wouldn't stay on the game, despite the fact that he'd tuned the Caddy radio to the sports station—they *were* still clearing the ice. There was a note of exasperation and desperation in Myra's voice that he'd never heard before. And that banging/clanging sound in the background?

He pulled the Caddy in front of the house. There was a light gleaming from the high windows of the garage, but Nick headed for the front door. He raised his hand to knock, but the door opened and a hand grabbed his forearm, dragging him inside and almost off his feet.

Myra's fingers dug into his right biceps. Her eyes were wide and wild as she gasped gratefully, "Thank goodness you got here! I'm about to go out of my mind." She glanced over her shoulder, toward the kitchen, then added in a hushed whisper, "If he asks, you've just stopped by, okay? If he finds out I called you he'll be furious. You know how it is."

Everything in the house appeared normal—as usual it looked lived in, but clean. There was no sign of Jenny. Still not comprehending, Nick looked down at Myra—her hair was pulled back, but wisps has escaped the clip and had fallen down around her ears and along the side of her face. "No, I *don't* know how it is," he answered, very carefully. "Why don't you tell me what—?"

He was interrupted by a loud metallic banging sound from the direction of the garage. Nick raised an eyebrow and glanced at Myra as the banging stopped, Schanke gave an unintelligible exclamation, and some furious language followed.

"Jenny's at a friend's house," she explained, her cheeks coloring slightly. "And he won't close the door—says it's too hot in there." With another sigh, she pulled Nick through the kitchen, toward the garage. "Honey," she called, "look who's stopped by!"

Nick's first thought upon seeing the interior of the garage was that a machine shop had imploded. The floor was covered with tools, various nuts, bolts, screws, and other assorted hardware. A large cardboard box had been opened to full length and was resting against the garage door windows, as if to keep prying eyes out. And Schanke was kneeling on the garage floor, wearing khaki pants and a blue and green Hawaiian shirt, a wrench in one hand and a length of pipe in the other.

He put down the pipe and groaned aloud as he struggled to his feet against the protests of his muscles. "So, partner—what brings you through this neck of the woods."

Nick was still trying to comprehend the extent of the mechanical carnage. He glanced at Schanke blankly, then let his eyes roam over the interior of the garage, trying to make sense of the bits and pieces. "I thought—you might want to watch the game. What are you doing? Building yourself a brain?"

"The game? Yeah—almost forgot." As Nick stepped away, treading carefully through the hardware, Schanke nodded. "Maybe after I'm done. Myra wanted me to get a start on putting Jenny's new bicycle together."

Nick looked up at the comment, then over to Myra, who was still standing in the doorway. "We promised her a new bike if her grades were good. School's over in a couple of days."

"And you've been putting it off," noted Nick. Spotting one of the wheels, he picked it up and turned it over in his hands.

"We've been busy. Lots of overtime, right?" When Nick raised an eyebrow, Schanke had the good grace to clear his throat. He gestured toward the mess on the floor and asked, "How hard can it be? I put my own bike together when I was a kid. And, boy, it was a real beauty!"

Replacing the wheel, he made his way over to what looked to be part of a handlebar. "Was that before or after the last ice age?"

"Real comedian this one," commented Schanke, as he turned toward his wife. "You see what I have to put up with at work?"

As Nick picked up the handlebar, two of the joined pieces came apart in his hands. Waving one toward Schanke, he asked, "How long have you been at this?"

"A couple of hours."

Carefully putting down the handlebars, Nick cast a surreptitious look at Myra—there was panic in her eyes and a plea for rescue. "Why don't I give you a hand? Not that you need it," he added, as Schanke's brow furrowed, "but if you get done quicker, maybe we could head back to the loft and watch the third period."

"On that drive-in screen you call a TV? Sure." Schanke turned to his wife. "Myra, we got a beer or two left?"

"I think we can find something," she said. "Nick? Anything for you?"

"No. Thanks." He straightened, then gave her a smile, which she matched. "Don't worry. I'll make sure it's safe to ride before I let him anywhere near the game." As Myra left, he continued searching the floor. "They give you instructions with this thing?"

"Over there." Schanke made his way through the mess, to the clear spot he'd left earlier. "Who needs 'em? They don't make much sense, anyway. I think they're in Japanese."

Nick spotted the paper and picked it up from the cement floor. Schanke was right—the instructions *were* in Japanese. But the characters were . . . odd.

Concentrating, he stared at it a moment longer. There was no diagram, no listing of parts. "This is printed *backwards*. The writing's reversed. And . . . I'm pretty sure this tells you how to put together a double-decker hibachi." Nick looked up from the paper to where Schanke has kneeling on the floor, again

trying to fit together two pieces of a wheel assembly that looked like they didn't belong on the same planet, never mind the same bicycle. "Where did you buy this?"

"Warehouse outlet. Got a great deal on it, too."

"I'll bet," answered Nick.

Schanke grinned at the tone of his voice. "Com'on, partner, how tough can it be for two of Toronto Metro's finest? You wanna hand me that wrench?"

Mentally kissing the second period of the game a not-so-fond farewell, Nick squatted down amidst the metal wreckage and gave Schanke the wrench. Picking up the handlebars again, he tried fitting the two pieces together, nodding when they slipped into place.

It *was* only a bicycle, after all. How hard could it be?

Then the pieces came apart, falling to the floor with a loud 'clang' before he could catch either of them. Schanke jumped at the sound, gave him a look, then went back to the wheel assembly.

With grim determination, Nick picked up the pieces from the floor and tried again. So what if he missed the game—it was a loss, anyway. A hat trick, in the first period?

He had a feeling it was going to be all downhill from there.

"Ow!" Nick jumped up and back, sending the second wheel assembly skittering across the concrete floor of the garage. He stuck his thumb in his mouth and glared at Schanke, muttering, "It's not supposed to bend that way."

"Yeah, but you see —" Schanke pointed to the crossbar that they'd been fitting into place. "It goes here. And we're going to have to bend it."

"Not *that*. My finger."

"Sorry," muttered Schanke.

Nick took his thumb out of his mouth and, satisfied that it wasn't beyond repair, looked down at the bits of assembled bicycle scattered about. His thumb was much better off than Jenny's bicycle, from what he could see. And she'd probably graduate college before they finished, never mind them making the third period of the hockey game.

"Looks like the Wright brothers are at it again," said Natalie's voice.

She was standing at the doorway to the kitchen, arms crossed and leaning on the molding. Her grin was maddening. "Thought I'd drop by—Myra said she had some Skin Pretty samples for me."

Nick wasn't buying the excuse for a second, especially after he caught sight of Myra's guilty expression. When Natalie wandered past him, he whispered, "She called you?"

"Said you might need some help." Her eyes widened as she took a look around the interior of the garage. "And I can see why."

"We're almost done," said Schanke stubbornly, still trying to fit together the crossbar and the wheel connector. "Another ten minutes or so."

"Looks like you've done a great job." Natalie walked through the wreckage, then picked up a twisted piece of metal. "What happened to this?"

Nick moved quickly, taking the piece from her hand. "I bent it."

She met his eyes and smiled—she didn't need him to explain that frustration had caused him to let his control over his vampiric strength slip. "So, bend it back," she whispered.

He ran his hand along the edge of the pipe and looked away. "I did."

"And?"

"I bent it again."

Placing her hands over his on the pipe, she said softly, "Still looks pretty sound. Bend it back *again*. For me."

Nick did as she asked, then released the pipe to her, adding under his breath, "I'll *buy* her a bike."

"You will *not*," hissed Natalie, so fiercely that she surprised him. But the smile was back in an instant. "Looks like you guys have everything pretty well in hand. You deserve a break. Why don't Myra and I finish up here?"

"You could still catch the last half of the game," prompted Myra.

"Third period," Nick corrected, absently. He shadowed Natalie, as she walked from piece to piece, her lips pursed. "We *can* do this, you know."

"So I see. You've done a great job so far." Coming to the handlebar assembly, she squatted down beside it.

"Nick did that," said Schanke, looking up from the crossbar that was still giving him trouble.

He was proud of that bit—it had taken him twenty minutes but he'd finally gotten it together. But no approval was forthcoming from Natalie. And she bit her lip as she looked over it. "What?" he asked anxiously.

"Oh . . . nothing." She flashed him what was meant to be a comforting smile.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. Really." As she rose, Natalie brushed past him, whispering, "It's *backwards*. It's a girl's bike, the handlebars on that model go the other way."

Nick's eyes narrowed as he stared down at the handlebar assembly. "The instructions are in Japanese," he muttered, defensively. "And backwards. They're for a hibachi."

"What about these?" Natalie picked up another piece of paper from the floor, glanced at it, then handed it to him.

English. A diagram—and that was *most* definitely a bicycle.

Nick was ready to swear the paper hadn't been there a moment ago. But when he opened his mouth, he couldn't quite get past a strangled protestation. In response, Natalie leaned on his shoulder and said softly, "Just get him out of here. Go watch the game or something, okay?"

He'd been in enough battles over the centuries to recognize a rout when he saw one. Hoping to salvage some of his dignity, he glanced at Schanke, who'd given up on the wheel assembly. His partner rose to his feet with a shrug. "We *have* pretty much finished," he said, in a lie so bold-faced that it shocked Nick. "I think we deserve a couple of cold ones and some game time."

"At *Nick's* place," pressed Myra. She crossed the floor to her husband, then grabbed his arm and started propelling him toward the door. "I packed a cooler for you with some sandwiches, chips and beer—it's on the kitchen table. If it's okay with you, Nick?"

Shaking his head, he looked at Natalie. "Yeah. I . . . guess so."

"Is she great or what?" asked Schanke, slipping his arm around his wife's waist and giving her a kiss on the cheek. "Thinks of everything."

"Just you remember to take the cooler with you," warned Myra, as they disappeared into the kitchen. "I don't want all that work to go to waste—"

Nick took a last look around the garage as Natalie grabbed his arm and started to drag him from the room. All that work—

"I *can* do this," he protested to her, quietly. "But the instructions were in Japanese . . . and backwards."

"So you said."

He stopped in the kitchen doorway and pulled her back inside the garage, his hands on her elbows, holding her in place. "You're getting a real kick out of this, aren't you?"

Natalie looked away, started to say something, then looked back at him, her smile crooked. "Yeah, I am. It's nice to know there's *something* you can't do."

"Putting together a bicycle has never been a survival skill."

"It is when you have an eight-year-old daughter."

"I don't *have* an eight-year-old daughter."

"You may. Someday."

There was something unspoken there, a remembrance of her promise to find him a way back to mortality, to a real life. After an awkward pause, Natalie looked away.

But he still felt the need to defend himself. "I put together a motorcycle." Nick glanced back at the garage interior and cleared his throat. "It's only a bicycle—"

"You want to make up for it? Eat one of Myra's sandwiches."

He winced, still staring at the various misshapen metal bicycle bits. "A *whole* sandwich?"

"A couple of bites. All right—one bite. You've had a rough evening." Reaching past him, Natalie shut off the garage light, then dragged him through the kitchen. "Just get going, so Myra and I can finish this before Jenny comes home," she said, heading for the front door.

"If you need any help—"

"We'll call," said Natalie, adding, "Promise!" when he fixed her with a suspicious gaze.

Myra was waiting at the front door. She took his hand and leaned forward to plant a kiss on his cheek. "Thanks for dropping by, Nick. Sorry to ruin your evening."

"I'm just sorry I couldn't have been of more help."

"You kept Don from driving me nuts for a hour—that was worth a fortune." Smiling, she released his hand.

Nick matched her smile, his more sheepish, then raised an eyebrow at Natalie. "Drop by when you finish," he told her. "I want to hear all the gory details."

"You *would*." She punched him in the shoulder. "Don't expect me for a while, it's going to take Myra and I some time to undo all the damage you guys did."

He froze, then half-turned back to them. "If anything's broken—"

"Go!" prompted Myra, with a laugh, pushing him away.

The door closed behind him. Still feeling slightly guilty and more than a little foolish, Nick walked to the Caddy. Schanke had ensconced himself in the passenger seat and was already working on one of the sandwiches from the cooler.

Sliding into the seat beside his partner, Nick plucked the sandwich from Schanke's hand and placed it back into the open cooler, saying, "Crumbs."

"I've got a napkin," mumbled Schanke, around a mouthful of white bread and ham. He crumbled the napkin into a ball, tossed it into the cooler, then settled back in the seat. "Geez, *you're* in a mood."

He turned the key in the ignition and looked over his shoulder, checking the empty street for traffic. "Schanke, we were totally defeated by a girl's bicycle. Doesn't that bother you at all?"

"*Defeated*?" Schanke made a noise.

At first, Nick wasn't certain whether he'd gotten a piece of ham caught in his throat and was too busy driving too check. But after a second, he realized Schanke was laughing. "What's the joke?"

"The joke," said Schanke, between wheezing, "is part of the reason you're still single. Remind me to

give you some of the ground rules before you get hitched."

"Like?"

"Like the 'honey do's'."

Nick stared at the road ahead, completely bewildered and half-tempted to turn the car around and drop Schanke and the damned ham sandwiches off on the man's front porch.

"You know . . . or maybe you don't. It's one of the things they live for—wives, that is." Sighing, Schanke leaned against the car door, head resting on his hand. "Every time you put your feet up and turn on the game, they hear you popping the tab off the beer even if they're at the other end of the house. And all of a sudden there's a half dozen things that have to be taken care of right then and there. 'Honey,'" he mimicked, "'can you do this? Honey, can you do that?'" Shaking his head, he smiled. "Takes some guys a couple years to figure out the answer."

After a moment's pause, Nick pressed, "Which *is*?"

"You become hopeless when it comes to doing *anything*." Schanke's eyes narrowed. "Now this is a trade secret, okay, so don't go spreading it around. And I'm not saying you can't screw in the occasional light bulb or unplug a drain or something. But you gotta draw the line somewhere. I use the two tool rule, myself. If it takes more than two tools, I'm outta there."

They'd reached the loft. Nick clicked the garage door opener. "You're telling me that you *wanted* to get kicked out?"

"In time for the second period. But I'll settle for third." He frowned, then glanced back at the cooler. "Never guessed Myra would call you in as backup."

Nick froze in place, letting the car roll into the garage. "You were driving her crazy," he managed, in his own defense.

"That's the goal—get 'em so nuts they throw you out."

The garage door was closing behind them. Nick hit the remote for the interior light so he wouldn't have to guide Schanke through the darkness. When Schanke headed for the door to the stairwell, he put two fingers in his mouth and whistled, then pointed toward the cooler in the back seat.

"I'm the guest," protested Schanke.

"It's *your* cooler."

Making a face, Schanke opened the rear door of the Caddy and hefted the cooler with a groan. Nick only grinned, but held the door open for him as they headed up the back stairs to the loft. "So, why'd Myra call Natalie?"

"She'd called you in—big mistake—so I guess she figured she needed more pull on her side if she was gonna kick us out." Schanke glanced back at him, over his shoulder as they went up the stairs. "She's good—Natalie is. Sounds like she's had practice."

"And you could've put that bicycle together by yourself?"

Schanke leaned the cooler against the wall as Nick unlocked the door. "Sure. It *was* only a bicycle. I figured you were playing along. Right?"

"Oh . . . yeah. Right." Nick held the door for Schanke, then headed for the remote. He flicked the switch and the wide-screen television came to life, the announcer stating that the third period was about to begin.

"What was the score at the end of the first?" asked Schanke, from the kitchen.

"Don't know. Myra called me after the hat trick—they were still clearing the ice when I headed to your place."

"A hat trick? Oh, man!" whined Schanke. He looked up hopefully, a beer tucked under his arm and a

sandwich in either hand. "Us or them?"

"Them."

"Ouch!" Schanke pressed one of the sandwiches into Nick's hands as he passed, heading for the couch. He flopped down and placed his beer on the table. "Well, we'll know in a minute. I don't have money riding on this one—Myra'd kill me, this close to payday. You?"

"No." Wincing at the sight of the beer sitting on his coasterless coffee table and the bread crumbs scattered across his living room, Nick shook his head. He picked up a few napkins that Myra had put in the cooler, then he threw one at Schanke as he moved to a chair and sat down.

"Hat trick, huh?" Sighing, Schanke popped back the metal tab on the can of beer and raised it to Nick in a mock salute. "Well, it's only a game, after all. Next time."

"Next time," he echoed. He stared down at the sandwich in his hand and took a small bite. It was like chewing sawdust. After a moment, he raised the napkin to his lips and spit out the bread and meat in disgust . . . and despair.

Natalie's comment echoed in his mind—Someday. Someday he might have an eight-year-old-daughter for whom he'd have to build a bicycle. Or a wife to drive nuts by pretending not to do household chores.

He found himself watching Schanke consume his sandwich and beer with more than a little jealousy. The man had no idea how good he had it.

The commercial had something to do with life insurance. Schanke looked over at him, then gestured toward the sandwich. "Great, huh? Nobody makes a ham sandwich like Myra. Yeah, I know, ham and bread, right? But she knows how to cut it just thin enough, right amount of mustard and mayo." Nodding, he took another bite of his sandwich. "Nobody," he mumbled, mouth full of food.

That, and the way Schanke glanced over his shoulder at the cooler in the kitchen, made Nick reconsider. Maybe Schanke *did* know how lucky he was. Happiness seemed a one-in-a-million shot in the mortal world, but Schanke had found some measure of it with his job and family. And if his luck continued, he'd never know what it was like to be exiled from the sunlight, from family, from happiness.

The third period was announced, but Nick stared blankly at the screen. No matter what Natalie said, 'someday' wasn't an option. Mortality was a dream, an impossibility, a miracle. And in this modern world of science, miracles didn't happen.

"What?" he asked, sitting upright, suddenly realizing that Schanke had shouted something.

"Can—you—believe—it?" repeated Schanke, pronouncing each word carefully, as he pointed toward the screen. "Not one hat trick, two. *Two*!" His beer spilled as he leaned forward, amazed, but he didn't seem to notice. "We pulled off a hat trick in the second period. They're only ahead by a goal."

Nick watched the replay in equal amazement, the three goals shot by the same player from the first period matched by the three goals shot by a player from the opposing team during the second period.

It was unprecedented.

It was astounding.

It was a—

"Miracle," murmured Schanke, his beer forgotten, the sandwich abandoned on the table. He peeled his gaze from the screen for a minute, a stupid grin pasted across his face as he glanced at Nick. "Man-oh-man, it's a miracle! Remind me, I owe Nat—her timing was perfect. I would've *killed* myself if I'd missed this third period."

Nick wasn't listening. Like Schanke said, it was just a game. He'd seen enough versions of games over the centuries to become bored with most of them, but not all. There was always a chance that something, anything, might happen. And that's why he continued to watch, long after the rule-makers

had passed into memory. There was always something new to try, some new goal to shoot for. Because miracles did, occasionally, happen.

Even in the modern world.

"Can you believe this?" repeated Schanke, eyes wide.

"I can," said Nick, so softly that he knew Schanke couldn't hear him. "I do."

Then he took another bite of the ham sandwich.

BACK TO NORMAL

By Sharon S. Scott

"Detective Knight, I want you and Schanke down there, now."

"But Captain, I've got paperwork stacked up a foot high on my desk . . . ."

"No buts. Get on it."

"Yes, Captain." He turned away from her office door, smiled at the face Dedrick made at him, and walked to his desk. He sighed, then pitched the stack of papers in his hand onto the pile already on his desk and went in search of Schanke.

And found him, as was usual lately, in the locker room, watching the Jays on a tiny television set he had smuggled in.

"Schank, hop to it. We've got a body."

Schanke's eyes were glued to the images flickering on the screen. "Yeah, yeah, just a minute. Two on base, and strike two . . . ."

"Schanke, duty calls. And we got it. Move it."

"Oh man, I gotta see this . . . . Yeah! Strike three! He's out!" Schanke switched the TV off, did a little dance of joy, and held his hand out to Larson. "Pay up. Can I call 'em, or what?"

Larson groaned, but pulled out his wallet and handed over a twenty dollar bill. The dancing policeman waved the bill in his face before stuffing

it in his pocket.

"Admit it, man, I got the knack—and it's a gift, ya know. Some day you're gonna learn that I know what I'm talkin' about."

Larson gave Knight a disgusted look and headed out of the locker room.

"You know you're going to get caught betting sooner or later. And you know Cohen isn't going to be happy about it."

"What she doesn't know won't hurt her. Besides, how's she gonna find out? This is the one place we're safe from her."

Knight frowned. "I wouldn't count on it. Somehow I don't think a sign saying 'Men's Locker Room' is going to keep her out if she decides she wants in."

"Yeah, you're probably right. She's a tough old broad."

Nick sat down on the bench and stared at his partner. "A broad? You're calling Captain Cohen a broad? You do like to live dangerously, don't you?"

"Yeah, well, she's been on my butt lately. What's her problem anyway? Is she going through the change?"

Nick stood up, took his keys out of his pocket, and moved towards the door. "Could it possibly be that she knows you think she's a tough old broad?"

"Maybe. So, what's up?"

"A body. Throat slashed."

"Oh, jeez, thanks, Knight."

"Hey, I tried to get out of it. Everybody disappeared as soon as the words 'throat slashed' came up."

"Wonderful. Just what we needed right before lunch time." They headed out of the building and to the Caddy.

"Hey, Nick, we got time for something to eat on the way?"

"Afraid not. Captain said get right on it."

Schanke got in the car and slammed the door a lot harder than necessary. "Damn, and I just won lunch money. Well, when we get done, then? I'm starving."

"Okay. What new gastronomic delight is in store for me today?"

"Oh, I don't know—sushi? Man oh man, I'm happy you're off that peculiar diet you were on—I hate eating alone."

"No, Schanke. No sushi. Read my lips. No sushi. I don't eat raw fish."

"It's good for you. Lots of protein."

"Lots of parasites, also. No. Absolutely not."

"Okay. How about shrimp and oysters, then? There's a great oyster bar down by the harbor."

Nick pulled the Caddy out onto the street. "Yeah, well, if I keep this up, I'm going to have to start working out at the gym or something. Between you and Myra and Nat, I've probably gained 10 pounds."

"Don't worry about it until you can't button your pants anymore. *Then* it's time to worry about dieting. Or you could just buy a larger size and quit worrying about it at all."

"Now that's a really intelligent solution to the problem."

"I didn't claim it was intelligent—but it works. Buy clothes that are too big and everybody'll ask if you've lost weight. Works every time."

Nick glanced over at his partner, then drove on.

When they arrived at the scene, the body had been covered with a sheet. Nick walked over to it, lifted the sheet, and noted the large amount of blood around the body. Thank God that didn't make him hungry any longer.

"How long ago?" He dropped the sheet and turned to Grace.

"Not long. Couple of hours at the most. Throat cut, defensive wounds on her hands. No ID."

"Great. Just what we needed."

Schanke walked up and started to lift the sheet. Grace nodded to him and said, "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"What's that supposed to mean? You think I haven't ever seen a stiff before?" He lifted the sheet and then dropped it as quickly as possible. "Doesn't do much for your appetite, I'll grant you that."

"I warned you, Schanke." She turned to Nick. "And somebody should have warned *you* about wearing sun block at the beach. That's some sunburn." She touched his face with one finger.

"Ow, don't do that. I was so busy slathering the stuff on the kids and watching to make sure they didn't drown themselves, that I forgot to put any on myself."

"Things have certainly changed for you, haven't they? The beach, kids, the day shift."

"Yeah, it's a whole new world. Nat's treatments for hematologicopapsia seems to have worked." He was still trying to explain that one, and to his great relief, Grace didn't comment.

He turned away at the sound of Schanke's yell.

"Hey, Nick, get over here!"

"Sorry, Grace, gotta go."

"Listen, you tell Nat I miss her since she got promoted. Tell her to call me, okay?"

Schanke yelled for him again.

"Will do." He kissed her cheek and ran towards the sound of Schanke's voice.

When he arrived at the warehouse door, Schanke had gone inside. He had donned gloves, and was gingerly picking up a knife with blood on the blade. "Look at this, will ya? Jeez, the perp didn't even try to hide this stuff. It's just laying here."

Suddenly Schanke stiffened and looked up. "You hear that?" he asked in a whisper.

"No. What and where?"

"I keep forgetting you don't have supersonic hearing anymore. Up there. Second floor. To the right. Sounds like somebody moving around and trying to be quiet about it."

"Okay, I'll go check it out. Give me some cover." Schanke nodded as Knight started cautiously up the stairs, gun drawn. When he reached the top, he looked into the first room, shook his head at Schanke, then tried the next doorway. Nodding to Schanke, he yelled, "Metro Police, come on out." When there was no response, he went in.

A shot rang out, and a man came barreling out the door, knocking Knight over in the process. Schanke yelled, "Police! Stop right there!" as the man ran down the stairs. Knight got up, and in an attempt to cut the perp off, leapt over the balcony railing and landed hard. Schanke chased the fleeing figure and caught up with him just outside the building. He hollered for backup as he cuffed the perp, and when it arrived, started back into the building to check on Knight.

And found him, on his back, on the floor.

"What's wrong? He didn't shoot you, did he?"

Nick sighed and then winced. "No, Schank, he didn't have a gun, remember? *I'm* the one who had the gun."

"Yeah, right. So why are you just laying there?"

"I think I did something to my back. It hurts like hell."

"So you want me to call for the paramedics?"

"No, just help me up."

The attempt was a miserable failure. "Okay, call the paramedics."

"Nick, take it easy. Let the nurse help you into the car."

"Okay. It hurts too much to do it myself. I'm putty in your hands."

Nat and the nurse maneuvered him into the front seat, and the nurse took the wheelchair back into the emergency room.

"Now, are we ready?" She got a careful nod from Nick, and whoops from the back seat. Nick winced, and Nat laughed. "I promised them we'd stop for banana splits on the way home from school. That was before I got the call from Don about you."

"Banana splits are okay with me, as long as I don't have to get out of the car to get them." He tried to look at the kids when they started giggling, but gave it up when his back muscles screamed at him. "What's so funny?"

Janny managed to stop giggling long enough to get out, "Oh, Dad, you look funny. Like Wile E. Coyote." She collapsed into giggles again.

"I look funny, do I? Yeah, Dad's a really funny guy today. Glad I could entertain you."

Nat started the car and pulled out of the hospital parking lot. "I'll take it slow and easy, but I did promise them."

"It's okay. Just one question—why do I look like Wile E. Coyote?"

Nat looked over at him and smiled. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe because you're all stiff, like a board? Like Wile E. Coyote after he falls off a cliff? Does this ring any bells?"

"Yeah, I get it now. My daughter thinks I'm a cartoon character."

"You know how easily entertained kids are."

"Some more easily than others, apparently." He bit his lip as the Caddy hit a larger-than-usual pothole.

"Sorry. I'll try not to do that again. We're almost there."

"Good."

Another couple of blocks down the street, she pulled into the parking lot of the Frozen North Ice Cream Emporium. The kids piled out of the back seat and ran shrieking into the building. "I want all chocolate and no vanilla! Vanilla is for wimps!" "No, it's not!" "Yes it is! You're a wimp!" "No I'm not!" "Yes, you are!" "Girls are wimps!" "No, boys are wimps!" "I'm gonna get *two* bananas and you're only gonna get one!" "No I'm not!" "Yes you are!"

Nat sat behind the wheel and watched them. "Did we ever have that much energy?"

Nick smiled. "I don't think so. Now go, wife, and get me a sundae with all chocolate and no vanilla. I've just heard from an impeccable source that vanilla is for wimps."

"Yes, master. Will do, master. One non-wimp sundae, to go." She kissed him on the cheek and got out of the car, dashing to catch up with the kids.

They were back in a few minutes, the kids carrying their treasure in their hands, Nick and Nat's in a bag.

"Now don't open the tops on those until we get home. You know how your Dad is about spills in the car."

Janny answered, "Yes, ma'am," and proceeded to poke Richie in the ribs. He yelled, "Wimp!" at her and poked her back.

"Okay, you two. Quit fighting. And be careful of that ice cream." They looked momentarily abashed, so she started the car and pulled out of the lot. They almost got home before warfare broke out again.

"Am not!" "Are too!" "Wimp, wimp, wimp!" "Am not!" "Are too!" "Mom, he hit me!" "No I didn't!" "Yes he did!" "Tattletale!" "Am not!" "Are too!"

"Both of you stop it. I can't drive and corral you two at the same time." As she pulled into the garage, the kids began to fight in earnest. "Baby!" "Am not!" "Are too!" "You're a baby, you're a baby, you're a baby!" "No I'm not!" "Yes you are!" "You started it!" "No I didn't!" "Yes you did!"

Nick's head was pounding, his back hurt, and now his nerves were being shattered. "*Stop* it!"

They knew it took a lot to make Dad yell, so they hushed, but continued the battle using physical means. Richie pushed Janny down in the floorboard, Janny kicked Richie, Richie kicked her back, and by the time Nat had stopped the car, Richie's banana split was spread all over the back seat and Janny's had hit the ceiling and was dripping into an unappetizing puddle on the carpet.

There was a sudden silence in the car. Nat was trying to group her resources to deal with the wrath Nick was sure to visit upon the children when he saw what they'd done; the kids were staring at the destruction they'd wrought; and Nick was attempting to get the strength to handle the torture of getting out of the car, up the stairs, and into bed.

Nat took a deep breath, undid her seat belt, pulled the keys out of the ignition, and took a deep breath. "Richard, Janette, listen very carefully to me. Are you listening?"

"Yes, Mom." "It's his fault!" "No, it's not!" "He kicked me first!" "No, I didn't!" "Yes you . . . ."

"BE QUIET, BOTH OF YOU! LISTEN TO YOUR MOTHER!"

They knew they'd better shut up when Dad used that tone of voice. They shut up.

"Thank you, Nick. I think I can handle this."

"You're welcome."

"Now, children. You will not say a word. You will get out of the car, unlock the door, go inside, get sponges and towels, and you will come back out here and clean up the mess you made."

Nick tried to turn his head to see what they'd done, but thought better of it when pain surged up and down his spine. "What did they do?"

"Believe me, Nick, you *don't* want to know. Now, you two get busy. DO YOU HEAR ME?"

"Yes, ma'am." Nat handed Richie the keys and the kids got out of the car and very quietly started toward the door.

"Okay, now it's your turn. Stay still till I get over there to help you out of the car."

"Yes, ma'am."

Nick awoke sweating from a dream of snarls, glistening fangs, and blood trickling down LaCroix's chin, mixed with visions of giant sticky spots on the seats of the Caddy. He wiped his forehead and was surprised, still, not to see blood on his hand. He looked over to Nat's side of the bed, which was empty, and then heard the sound of water running in the bathroom. Without thinking, he tried to get up out of bed, but fell back with a groan. He tried again, and managed to get up this time. Bent over and limping, holding on to the furniture as he went, he managed to make it to the bathroom door.

"Nat!"

She turned off the shower and yelled, "Nick? What are you doing out of bed?"

"Nat, my back really hurts. Where'd you put the pain pills?"

"Hang on a minute. I'll find them for you."

"Just tell me where they are. I can take a couple of pills all by myself."

"Sorry. They're downstairs on the kitchen counter. I forgot to bring them up. Yell at Richie to bring them up to you."

"Okay." He started towards the bedroom door to yell at Richie and then had a better idea. The flip-phone he used on the job was in his coat pocket, so he hobbled over to the chair where Nat had thrown the coat, pulled out the phone, and dialed their home number.

Janny answered. "Knight resdence."

"Hi, Pumpkin, it's Dad. Would you look on the kitchen counter and bring me the bottle of pills in Mom's purse?"

"Daddy? Where are you?"

"I'm upstairs."

"You called from upstairs? You're weird, Daddy."

"I know. Your mom tells me that all the time. Just bring me the pill bottle, okay?"

"Okay, Daddy. I love you."

"I love you, too. Bye."

"Bye, Daddy."

He set the phone down and smiled. Janny called him 'Daddy' only when she was sleepy, sick, or in trouble. He didn't have to guess which it was this time.

In a few minutes she knocked on the bedroom door. "Daddy?"

"Come in."

She opened the door, peeked in, and grinned when she saw him sitting up in bed smiling at her. She walked very carefully across the room, carrying her favorite plastic mug with a top on it. It had fat purple dinosaurs on it.

"Thank you very much. You saved your mom a trip up and down the stairs."

She smiled from ear to ear, and jumped up on the bed beside him. He stifled a groan as she reached over to give him a kiss on the cheek and made the bed move.

"What's that for?"

"Just 'cause." She snuggled up against him and he kissed the top of her head. "Did you remember the pills, too?"

"They're in my pocket. Do you need one?" She reached into her pocket and pulled out a hair ribbon, a Polly Pocket, and the bottle of pills.

"I need *two*, I think." He tried to get the top off the bottle and failed. He looked over at the child sitting next to him, and handed it back to her. She got the top off in a matter of seconds and handed bottle and top back to him.

"Thanks." He swallowed two of the pills with what he had thought was water. It turned out to be grape Kool-Aid.

"What happened to you, Daddy? Did you get sick at work?"

"Well, I tried to jump off something that was too high, and I fell down and hurt my back."

"Does it hurt *bad*?"

"Yes, it does, but it's better now, thanks to you. What's your brother up to?

"We're playing Nintendo. I'm winning. Are you okay now? 'Cause I need to go finish winning."

"I'm okay now. Go on and finish your game. Bye." He kissed the top of her head again, and she bounded out of the room, then turned and came back.

"I'm really, really sorry for messing up your car. We cleaned it up really good."

"It's okay. I'm really, really sorry I yelled at you."

"Okay. Bye."

He heard her running down the stairs and started to yell at her to be careful, then thought he'd done enough yelling for one day, and didn't.

He heard Nat sigh. She was standing in the bathroom door, in a towel.

"I'm really, really sorry they messed up your car, too. But kids spill things. It's no big deal."

"Yeah, that's what you told me about changing diapers, too."

She couldn't control her laughter at that statement and at the look on his face.

"Wasn't that fun? But now they're past that stage. Now they just spill ice cream in the car."

"It's probably going to leave a stain."

"Quit worrying about it, will you? I'll take it tomorrow and get it cleaned at the car wash. They can get almost anything out."

"Are you sure you'll have time tomorrow? Since you're such an important person now?" All of a sudden he wasn't smiling anymore.

Neither was she. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're never home anymore, since you got promoted to Chief Medical Examiner. The kids are beginning to think the maid is their mother. Why can't somebody else deal with these things?"

She stared at him, a flush beginning at the base of her throat and moving up. "You son of a . . . No, I won't insult your mother. *I'm* never here? When's the last time you spent an entire weekend with the family? How many times have you been called in when you were supposed to be off-duty in the last month? Why can't *you* let someone else deal with these things?" She stomped over to the closet and took out a warm-up suit, stomped into the bathroom, and slammed the door.

A few minutes later, she stomped out of the bathroom and moved to the dresser to put her watch and earrings back on.

"I'm sorry, Nat. We're both in the wrong. Neither of us is here enough. We both love our jobs. We both think we're helping to make things better. We're contributing."

She turned to face him. "You're right. I think we just haven't been willing to admit it. We both need to make some changes, spend more time with the kids. But Richie needs braces, and Janny needs to have her adenoids removed, and all that costs money. Oh, and that reminds me, I got a note from Janny's teacher—she keeps talking during story time. And the kids were playing with the shutters again, and broke one of them. The VCR has quit again. The sink in the kids' bathroom is stopped up. And my car is falling apart. And we've got to decide about that house in the country."

"Nat, none of that is important. We can get Janny's adenoids removed, and have braces put on Richie's teeth, and call a plumber, and replace the shutters with drapes. We've got money. Money's the least of our problems. If anybody knew just how much money we *do* have . . . "

"It'd be kind of like Schanke finding out you were a vampire?"

He grinned. "Yeah, something like that. We'd be in trouble with the tax people, for sure. Even though we did give a major amount of the cash stash to charity."

She came and sat on the bed next to him. "I still can't believe Don never figured out just what you were. All the signs were there."

"I think he knew, deep down. He just wouldn't ever admit it to himself."

"So, how are you feeling? Did one of the kids bring you the pain pills?"

"Janny did. And something to wash them down with. You don't want to know *what*. Any idea how long it'll take to get over this and back to normal?"

"Nick, you probably won't ever be 'back to normal,' whatever that is. The doctor told me that you've got several of the symptoms of arthritis. So your back problems will more than likely flare up again, even when you get over this episode."

"Arthritis? I don't have arthritis. Old people get arthritis."

"Yeah, well, just how old are you now? 808? 809? It's a part of aging. It's one of the liabilities of being human."

"Why me?"

"Why not you? You've abused your body for years—nay, bold knight, centuries—flying, leaping off tall buildings, crashing through windows, breaking down doors, rescuing fair maidens, getting stabbed and shot, and run through with mufflers and assorted other objects. What do you expect? You're mortal now, and mortals age, and their bodies wear out. They get stiff joints, and headaches, and poor digestion, and corns on their feet. And have back trouble. It's just age catching up with you. You've got to remember that you can be hurt now, and that you're subject to all the mortal aches and pains and diseases."

"That's a lovely picture of what I've got to look forward to. Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome. It's not going to happen immediately. You've just got to slow down, take it easy. You'll be okay again in a couple of days."

"But there's no cure for the arthritis?" He looked like a hurt child.

She tried to remember that they had both lost hope that he'd ever become mortal again, until that mysterious virus had spread through the vampire community, 'curing' them all of their vampirism. They'd both seen that as a miracle. Maybe he thought there would be another miracle cure for the problems of aging.

"No, there's no cure yet. You don't heal at the speed of light anymore. That's why I keep telling you to be careful."

"I know, I know. But I forget. It's hard to get used to not being able to do the things I used to be able to do."

She smiled at him, then wearily got up.

"Where are you going?"

"Take another nap. I've got to go feed the kids and then get them bathed and to bed. I'll be back."

When she returned, an hour and a half later, he was asleep. He looked like a choir boy when he slept. A choir boy with a few wrinkles and some gray hair, but a choir boy none the less. She padded to the closet, removed and hung up her clothes, and changed into a nightshirt. She looked up at a sound from the direction of the bed.

"What?"

"Just appreciating the view."

"Even if you're in no shape to do anything about it?"

"Even so."

She got into bed beside him, hesitating before laying her head on his shoulder. "Is it okay?"

"More than okay. I'd be upset if you didn't. Remember what I said about old habits dying hard? We've been married seven years. You're an old habit."

"I suppose the sentiment is real, however poorly worded."

"Yeah, well. You know what I mean." She kissed him, then fit her head back into the curve of his

shoulder. "I've been laying here thinking about the last eight years. The virus. All of us being brought back across. Finally being able to tell you how I felt about you, *and* doing something about it, without fear of killing you. The wonder of our children. It's awesome, you know? In the original sense of the word. I'm filled with awe about us, about our children, about . . . life."

"LaCroix certainly didn't feel the same way about coming back over. Is he still funding that research to figure out a way to become a vampire again?"

"Yeah. And spending a goodly portion of his money in the attempt. I talked to him on the phone yesterday—he's flying off to Egypt to investigate the secrets of the Pharaohs and mummies, or some such nonsense."

"Oh well, it keeps him busy. He's not over here pestering us all the time, boring the kids silly with all that talk about the good old days. They think he's a pompous old windbag, and don't believe a word he says. Every time he starts one of those interminable stories, their eyes glaze over."

"Nobody would believe it if they hadn't lived through it, would they?"

"Probably not. And it really is weird thinking there are *no* vampires left anywhere on the face of the earth." She looked up at him to see his reaction. Sadness was there, as well as pain. She always knew when he was thinking of Janette. No one knew what had happened to her. No one had heard from her since the day after the change. He mourned for her, still.

"Maybe when those of us who actually were vampires die of old age, nobody'll believe we ever existed. We'll be relegated to the ranks of myth, like trolls, or the little green men from Mars."

"Maybe you should write your memoirs. Put it down on paper- -"this is the way it was." Or keep a computer diary, like that kid on that old television series. What was his name? Doogie something. What a stupid name. And a stupid premise for a series. Who's going to let a 16-year old operate on them?"

He smiled. "The same people who believed in vampires? You know, it's very strange, but those centuries are beginning to get a little blurry in my mind. I've been trying to remember Henry VIII's equerry's name, and can't. It's just on the tip of my tongue . . . ."

"It's age, Nick. It does weird things. Memories fade, bad and good."

He was very quiet for a few minutes. "You know what I miss most?"

"Your mind?" Maybe that would put a smile on his face again.

It did.

"No, not my mind. Flying. I miss flying. I forget sometimes that I can't. I get poised for a take-off . . . and then . . . nothing. And I feel like a fool."

"I'll bet you look it, too."

"Nat, here I am, pouring out my guts to you, and you're making wisecracks. Why, I oughta . . . ."

"Kiss me, right?"

"Right."

A NOTEWORTHY OCCURRENCE

By Susan M. Garrett

"Nice job!" commented Natalie, as she wrapped the gauze lightly around his elbow and upper arm. "A joint, too, no less. Bend—"

Nick bent his elbow at her command, wincing slightly. "How bad is it?"

"Anyone else, I'd say they'd be out for at least half a week and have to give up their career as a right handed hitter. You?" Natalie taped the edge of the gauze in place and stepped back, admiring her handiwork. "You'll be ready for a home run in another three, maybe four hours. The next time you chase somebody into a construction site, watch out for free-floating steel beams, okay?"

"Never saw it coming. But I'll take your advice." Carefully, Nick rolled down what was left of his torn and bloodied shirt over the gauze, then examined the sliced sleeve of his leather jacket.

"You'd better drop by the loft and change that," warned Natalie, as she walked back to the sink to wash her hands. "I don't think Schanke's going to miss it. And you're *very* lucky he was on the other side of the site when it happened."

"Yeah." Still toying with the ruined sleeve, Nick slipped off the counter and to the floor. "The last

thing I need is a trip to the emergency room."

"Which is what you're going to get if you leave here one more time without *that*."

Nick followed Natalie's glance toward the brown paper bag on her desk—yet another version of the protein drink she'd been trying to foist on him for the past three days. The last one had been such a dismal failure; he made a face, the memory of the taste still lingering.

But Natalie turned from the sink, catching his look as she dried her hands. "Okay, so maybe the last one wasn't any good—"

"Any *good*?" He shook his head. "Nat, that was pure poison. I've tasted moonshine that could strip paint off metal and it was better than that stuff. You want to get rid of me, send a note to Stonetree certifying me fit for day shift—it'll be quicker and a lot less painful."

She lightly slapped his wounded arm as she passed, heading for the filing cabinet. "That's next on the agenda."

Nick froze. "You're not serious?"

"Oh, I'm not talking day shift, but it wouldn't hurt for you to go out in the sunlight now and again—and I'm not talking about the emergency double shifts you get called on once in a blue moon," she added quickly, before he could protest. "No trips to the lake or anything. Go to the mall, or the symphony, or even a movie. Just . . . get out of the loft."

Nick walked over and leaned on the filing cabinet. "Nat, I *sleep* during the day."

"Yeah, right. Like if you were mortal you *wouldn't* look like a raccoon." When he looked away, acknowledging his occasional bouts with insomnia, she slammed the filing cabinet drawer shut, to regain his attention.

"If I get caught—there goes my alibi for a permanent night shift schedule."

"So, I'll write you a note." When he smiled and shook his head in disbelief, she added, "All I'm saying is, stop wasting time. Do something *constructive*."

Nick held up his arm, the gauze visible beneath his torn jacket sleeve. "Tried that this evening. Didn't work. And speaking of which—" He glanced up at the clock. "Time to get back. Thanks for the patch up."

"Just call me Dr. Frankenstein."

He ran out the door and into the outer office, barely catching Natalie's muffled oath as she discovered he'd intentionally left the protein drink on her desk again. Just in case, Nick took the elevator down to the street level and the back door out into the parking lot, knowing that she'd never catch up to him. He was in no mood to face the latest version of the vile concoction she'd created to replace the blood he needed to survive.

But every time Nick turned the wheel of his car and the gauze rubbed against the inside of his sleeve, he was reminded of just how much effort Natalie was investing in *his* quest for mortality. From sporadic patch-ups and extrication of stray bullets, to the hours of testing and research that she did on her own time . . . and, unlike him, she didn't have all that much time to spare. He was damned lucky his attitude hadn't caused her to give up on him.

The taste of the protein drink shouldn't be all that important, although—Nick frowned again as he pulled his car up to the loft—it *was* pretty wretched stuff. The least he could do was try to stick with the

program. Who cared *what* it tasted like, if it helped bring him back across?

He was late. Nick ran upstairs, took a moment to peel off his blood spattered leather jacket and shirt without ripping off the dressing Natalie had applied, and found a shirt with suitably loose sleeves and another jacket. He was on his way back down the stairs at a run, when his steps slowed.

It was the blood, that siren call from the refrigerator. It's what his body needed at the moment, what he *craved*, to compensate for the jagged steel that had sliced open his elbow and arm. The blood would help him heal, make him strong, make him feel alive.

But that was a cheat. Because he wasn't *alive*.

Turning his head, Nick ran down the rest of the steps and to the door of the loft, relaxing only when he reached the elevator. Natalie said it was the blood that kept him from coming back across. If it meant he had to put up with a little discomfort from an occasional wound, fine. And if it also meant that he'd have to try every protein concoction she came up with until they found one that worked . . . well, not *fine*, but he'd live with it. Especially if it meant that he'd end up living, instead of this twilight half-life in which he'd existed for so many centuries.

If he hadn't been so late back to work, he would've stopped back at the Coroner's Office to apologize and pick up the drink. As it was, he pushed the speed limit to get back to the station, making his first priority a phone call to Natalie.

Schanke was at the main desk when he arrived. "Where the hell have *you* been? I head back to my car, find the perp cuffed in the back seat, covered in blood. And it isn't *his*?"

"Scraped my elbow," said Nick quickly, shrugging out of his coat, and wincing as he forgot about the bandage—he'd add another couple of hours to Natalie's healing estimate, since he'd managed to resist the call of the blood. He headed toward his desk, Schanke dogging his heels. "Nothing serious, but one of those scrapes that bleed like crazy."

"And Mr. fashion-plate didn't want to get his clothes messed up?" Shaking his head, Schanke perched himself on his own desk. "All I hear over the radio is you've put yourself off-call for a coffee break." He sighed, reached behind him and picked up a folder. "I walked him through booking. So you do the paper trail."

"Deal." Nick took the folder, sat down at his desk, his hand reaching for the phone—and stopped. Instead, he picked up the brown paper bag that sat neatly in the center of his blotter.

"Messenger from the Coroner's Office brought that over," noted Schanke. "You got some clues you're not telling me about?"

"No." Nick opened the bag. Sure enough, the protein drink container was inside. "It's . . . lunch," he explained, reaching inside the bag and steeling himself for the first sip of the dreadful drink.

The container seemed awfully light. Suspicious, he lifted the cap and peered inside.

It was empty.

"Light lunch," commented Schanke.

"Yeah." A sudden dread stole through him. Was Natalie telling him that this was the last straw? Was she finally giving up on him?

But there was something in the cup—his fingers couldn't quite reach it at the bottom. Nick tipped the cup over and a folded white slip of paper fell onto his desk. Schanke reached for it, but he was faster,

picking it up and turning away.

Nick unfolded the piece of paper. It was on letter head from the Coroner's Office, in Natalie's handwriting, and dated that evening.

To Whom it may concern,

Please excuse Detective Nick Knight from all day shifts until such time as you are otherwise notified, as he has a tendency to burn up in sunlight. Please note that this condition is only temporary.

Dr. Natalie Lambert, M.E.

"What is that, a promissory lunch?" asked Schanke.

"A promise—of sorts," answered Nick. Smiling, he folded the note and placed it inside his jacket pocket, away from Schanke's curious eyes. "And, a reminder." He looked around the office, then spotted the newspaper behind Schanke. Snapping his fingers, he gestured toward the newspaper with one hand, picking up the phone with the other.

After a confused pause, Schanke handed over the paper. Nick dialed the Coroner's Office extension, while flipping to the entertainment section of the paper. He scanned the listings quickly, looking for something . . . appropriate.

"Forensics?"

"Hi—Grace? This is Detective Knight. Could you put me through to Nat, please?"

"Yeah, sure—hang on a sec."

Nick ran his finger down the listings, shaking his head, nothing seemed—ah, there it was! He heard the extension buzz, then Natalie picked up.

"Forensics—Dr. Lambert speak—"

"Nat?"

There was a brief pause. Then, she chuckled. "Nick. I guess the messenger got there."

"He did. You're right. I'm sorry." He met Schanke's wide eyes over the desk and turned away, lowering his voice. "Look, I owe you. And I've been thinking about what you said. But I'm not too hot on soloing, first time out. So, how about a movie?"

There was another pause. "You mean, a *matinee*?"

"Yeah. Something like that. I'll even spring for the popcorn."

"At those prices, you'd better. So, what's playing?"

He turned, noted Schanke's intensely disinterested interest, and glanced down at the paper again. "There's a classic theater downtown, they're running a series of spaghetti westerns. And there's one I've never seen before . . . 'Blood in the Sun'?"

He half expected her to hang up on him.

She didn't.

assignment: KNIGHT

By Susan M. Garrett

Nick looked down at the paperwork on his desktop, then up at the clock. It was almost seven. Almost time. Why he'd ever agreed to do this was beyond him.

No, he knew why he'd agreed to do this. He owed Schanke. And if he said that it hadn't touched him to be asked to carry out this very special assignment, he'd have been lying.

A movement—out of the corner of his eye he caught the papers flashing by, the file landing on his desk. "Special delivery?" he asked, as Natalie plopped down in Schanke's chair, across from him.

"End of shift. Figured I'd dropped by on my way home." Gesturing toward the file, she added, "There's your night's work . . . unless somebody turns up a body."

"Schanke's night's work," corrected Nick. Smiling, he picked up the folder and deliberately reached across, placing it squarely on Schanke's blotter, adding, "He's taking my shift tonight. I've got a date."

"Have you?" Natalie looked away, toward the office door. "Washing your car again?"

"No."

"Then it's a real date? A real 'people' date?"

"Uh-huh." Nick tried to keep his expression neutral. "I'm escorting a young lady."

"Movie?"

"Ice cream parlor, actually."

That, at least, got her attention. Raising an eyebrow, she stared at him. "How young is 'young'?"

He shrugged, then looked down at the form on his desk again, but felt her eyes still on him. "Well, when you're eight hundred years old, the age thing—"

"Means a heck of a generation gap."

Nick looked up at her, tapping his pen against his cheek. "This doesn't bother you . . . me going out on a date?"

"Me?" Natalie's hand rose to her throat and hovered there a moment as she tried for an incredulous expression and failed. "Why should it bother me?"

"Good." Hiding a smile, Nick looked back to the paperwork.

"Where did you two, uh, meet?"

"It's something Schanke fixed up."

Natalie leaned across the desk, horrified. "You let Schanke fix you up with a date?"

Before he could answer, Schanke appeared in the doorway. Puffing, he staggered to the desk. "Nick—I'm sorry I'm late. But you know Myra. First she had to change her outfit three times, then we had to take pictures. Hope you're not too camera shy, she's got at least a half a roll left. And wait until that flash blindness clears before you head out of the driveway, okay?"

Winking at Natalie, Nick rose to his feet and lifted his jacket from the back of the chair. "Take it easy, Schank. And don't worry. I won't bite."

"Well, let's hope she takes it easy on *you*. She's one tough little cookie, you know."

"I know."

By this time, Natalie looked completely perplexed. She'd left Schanke's chair and was leaning against the edge of the desk. "I can't believe Nick's going along with this."

"Neither can I," answered Schanke, with an obvious air of relief. "You know, finding somebody you can trust is just so hard these days." He caught Nick's arm as he shrugged into his coat sleeve. "Where are you taking her?"

"Ice cream parlor?" offered Nick.

"Good. Great. That's her home turf, she'll be good there. Just—order something small for yourself. She'll try to outdo you."

"I won't be ordering anything, actually," said Nick looking to Natalie for help.

And she jumped in, despite the small frown she tossed in his direction. "That lactose intolerance still bothering you?"

"Ah, geez," said Schanke sympathetically. "Sometimes I think I'm the only guy on the continent keeping the dairy industry going. Still—" He pointed at Nick. "None of those big banana splits or anything. Maybe a cup of ice-cream, sprinkles—she likes the colored ones—a little hot fudge. No strawberries, it makes her break out in a rash."

Nick met his eyes and matched his grave expression. "No strawberries, check."

Schanke slapped him on the back. "I'm counting on you. You won't be the one up at three AM if she gets a stomach ache."

"I'm certain you'll be sure to call me."

"Damn straight I would." Schanke looked at the clock on the wall. "Okay, so by the time you pick her

up, it's seven. Say you get to the place—this and that—drive her home . . . back by eight-thirty."

"Eight-thirty?' asked Natalie, staring at Nick with wide eyes.

"Okay . . . nine," amended Schanke, taking her comment as a criticism. But he scowled at Nick. "She's got school tomorrow. And if she's not in bed by ten tonight, Myra'll *never* get her up and out in time for that bus in the morning. Which means I'll have to drive her—"

"Jenny!" exclaimed Natalie. When they both turned and looked at her, she cleared her throat and added, "You're taking Jenny for ice cream?"

Nick managed to fight back a smile and stared at her with a blank expression. "Yeah. Why? Who else did you think—?"

But Natalie wasn't buying any of it. She picked up the file from Schanke's desk, smacked Nick hard in the shoulder, so that the file folder creased, then turned her back to him and her attention toward Schanke. "What's going on?"

"It's a school assignment," said Schanke, as she handed him the folder. "It's some character-building thing. The kids have to interview someone they admire and write a report. Unfortunately," he cleared his throat, "it can't be a parent or a relative. And Jenny asked for Nick."

Nick ducked his head, uncomfortable when Natalie glanced at him, and shrugged, "She's gotten the idea from somewhere that I saved Schanke's life—"

"Which is true," pressed Schanke. "Besides, the kids have to go it alone—no help from parents or anything. And I don't think I'd trust my little girl to anyone else."

For the hundredth time since Schanke had talked him into this thing, Nick turned, the words at the tip of his tongue—he couldn't do this. He couldn't deal with this much trust, not with Schanke not knowing who he was. *What* he was.

But Natalie stepped forward, as if sensing what he was about to do. Taking his arm, she pushed him toward the doorway. "Then Mr. Hero had better get going. You don't want to keep your *date* waiting."

"Nine o'clock," called Schanke from behind them. "And the colored sprinkles!"

Again, Nick nearly turned, but Natalie kept him moving toward the door. "Nat," he whispered, "I don't think—"

"You're right—you *didn't* think. But you promised to do this. And you're going to break Jenny's heart if you cancel out on her at this late date."

She wasn't going to let him get away. Natalie stayed with him, marching him down the concrete steps at the front of the station and out to his car. But once there, Nick stopped and grabbed her arm. "I've got a great idea—why don't *you* go? You're a hero, too. You help us catch the bad guys. I'll drive you over there—"

"Oh, don't tell me you're afraid of spending a couple of hours with an eight-year-old girl?" When he turned away from her and leaned on the side of the car, he could hear the wonder in her voice. "My God, you *are* nervous, aren't you?"

"Of course I'm nervous. I have a right to be nervous. And if Schanke had any idea of what I am—"

"He knows *exactly* what you are," said Natalie. But when Nick turned, horrified, she folded her arms and added sternly, "You're his partner. You're his friend. He trusts you with his life every night you go out together. And he trusts you with his daughter." When he looked away again, she laughed lightly. "Nick, it's a school project. She'll ask you a couple of questions. She'll eat some ice-cream. And you'll take her home. If it's any consolation, I bet she's more nervous than you are."

"Yeah?" Not quite believing, he dared a look back at her.

And Natalie was smiling. "If I was eight-years-old, and I had to ask my dad's good-looking partner a

bunch of stupid questions and my mom had been fixing my hair for an hour and taking pictures . . . I'd probably have a stomach ache *before* the ice cream."

"Maybe you're right." Reaching out his hand, he touched her cheek. "Thanks, Nat."

"Just get her home by nine," she warned, as he opened the driver's side door of the Caddy and slipped behind the wheel. "Schanke's going to be a basket case until you get back here and if he doesn't get a call from Myra by nine—"

"I know, he'll try to talk Stonetree into putting out an APB on us." He turned the key in the ignition, then paused, looking at her.

"What?" she asked, hands on hips.

"I was just wondering—your mother did that to you, didn't she? Fussed with your hair, dressed you up, took pictures."

Natalie bit down on one side on her lip and looked away. "Yeah. She did. I hated that damn bow."

"Any chance those pictures are still floating around somewhere?"

"Are you kidding? They had blackmail potential—I burned the pictures *and* the negatives. And you're stalling."

When she moved to smack the side of the Caddy, Nick held up his hands in surrender. "All right, all right—don't hurt the car. You're right. I'm stalling."

"You'll do fine."

"Yeah. Maybe." Nick looked out the windshield, then back at her. "One more question?"

An eyebrow arched, she eyed him suspiciously. "What?"

"You really think I'm good-looking?"

Gritting her teeth, Natalie pointed toward the car. "If you're not out of here in ten seconds, I'm starting with the tires. Then the fender. Then the hood—"

"All right. I'm goin', I'm goin'!" Nick checked to make certain Natalie was clear of the car and let the engine roar to life. In his side and rearview mirror, he could still see her standing in the parking lot, her shaking fist turning into a wave—which he returned as he sped away.

He thought about what she'd said as he made his way to Schanke's house and some of his nervousness eased. After all, it *was* only a few hours. He'd done well enough with Lisa and he'd had to keep her entertained *and* protect her from Mafia hit men. This was only a school assignment. He'd done a quick review of his current bio, just in case, so she wouldn't catch him off-guard. He had nothing to worry about, really. Other than a possible sudden illness on his car upholstery.

But, as he pulled up into the Schanke's driveway, Nick realized he'd forgotten completely about Myra and her camera. The flash had barely faded before he managed to blindly place the car in park and turn off the engine, while shielding his eyes from a second assault. "Myra—would you wait until I'm out of the car, at least?"

There were spots of light blotting out random portions of his vision, but these were fading enough for him to see that Myra was smiling sheepishly. "Sorry, Nick." She slung the camera strap over her shoulder. "Guess I just got carried away. Jenny's just getting her stuff together, she'll be ready in a second." As soon as he was out of the car, Myra looped her arm through his, walking with him up to the house.

He smiled and shook his head—it never failed to amaze him how completely Schanke and his wife had accepted him. Despite the convenient excuses that countered every dinner invitation or afternoon barbecue, they never stopped asking. It both pleased him and made him very uneasy, that he could lie to these people so easily in the face of their friendship and kindness. But if he didn't lie . . . they'd never

accept him for what he really was. They couldn't.

"Don said I should have her home by nine," said Nick, after a moment's pause. He reached forward and held the door open for her. "If that's all right—?"

"That's fine. And I bet he belly-ached about having to drive her to school. Twice in three years she's missed the bus, both times when he's been on double shift. I offered to drive, but—you know Don."

"Yeah. I guess I do." Nick stuck his hands in his pockets, again uneasy. The Schanke home was . . . comfortable, lived-in. But there was a clean, cared-for scent to the place.

Myra headed toward the living room and Nick followed as far as the doorway from the foyer, where he leaned on the sill. "You want a cup of coffee?" she asked, picking up a coloring book and crayons as she moved past an end table.

"No. Thanks anyway. And I—I'll get her home on time."

"I know you will." Myra turned toward him, looking down at the box of crayons in her hand. "And I should thank *you*. I know you've got better things to do than take on our daughter for an evening. When they gave out that assignment, they sent home a letter about being careful about who we sent our kids with. Seems like—seems like when I was a girl, things like that didn't happen. We didn't have to worry about that stuff, where I was from. But now," Myra looked up at him, puzzled, "we can't seem to get away from it. We're always telling our kids to be afraid, watch out, don't trust anybody. If they can't learn to trust adults, what are they going to be like when they grow up? Who will they trust?" Then, she shook her head, as if embarrassed at speaking her thoughts aloud. "Don't mind me, Nick. It's just that . . . my baby's growing up."

"You're doing better than Don," he promised, smiling.

She laughed and took the camera strap from her shoulder, setting the camera on the end table. "You should have seen him! He was driving Jenny crazy." She walked past Nick and over to the stair railing. Looking upward, she called, "Jenny? Nick's here." Then she turned toward him and leaned against the stairwell. "I'm not looking forward to the teen years. Once the phone calls begin, the boys start dropping by—you *know* Don's going to be impossible."

"He *did* say something about sending her to a convent when she hit sixteen," admitted Nick, with a grin. Then he looked upward, at the sound of running footsteps along the upstairs hallway, and sobered. "Doesn't hurt to be careful. Like you said—things are different now. You never really *know*. Anybody."

"Great. The entire precinct'll be staking out every boy in the senior and junior class." Myra laughed again, this time at his serious expression. "I know it's occupational hazard, Nick, but you should learn to lighten up. I won't take Don food shopping any more—I think he spends half the time checking out the other shoppers against his wanted felon list. *And* I end up with a cart full of cookies. Jenny, *would* you hurry—"

She came down the stairs at a run, slowing only as she spotted Nick. There was that shy smile, maybe a little more shy than usual, that offset her freckles. Her eyes were large and brown—definitely from her mother—but her hair favored her father. And Nick knew her attitude, from the few times he'd spent more than a few minutes with Jenny, was pure Schanke.

His unease started to fade when he noticed that the fingers she'd clasped around her notebook were almost white. Natalie was right, Jenny was as nervous as he and with far less reason. Her, "Hi," was small and soft and scared, accompanied by a nervous tug at the bow barretted at the side part of her hair.

The bow removed any further dread in him, Natalie's words again echoing in his memory. "Hi, Jenny. The dress—the dress looks nice."

She looked down at the dress, then back at him with such a long-suffering look that he understood

immediately—the sooner he got her out of the house and away from Myra and Schanke's proud-parent routine, the happier she'd be. "You ready to go?," he added quickly. "Your dad's kinda put a curfew on us . . . ."

"Oh, let me get the camera!" said Myra, turning and dashing back into the living room.

Taking a breath, Nick walked over to the stairwell and leaned against the banister. "Think we should make a break for it?"

Jenny shook her head. "No. Mom's pretty fast. And she doesn't give up. Dad left his badge one night and she chased the car for a block before she caught up with him at the stop sign."

He nodded toward the notebook. "Got some tough questions in there?"

She shrugged, then smiled. "Naw, it's pretty easy stuff. Can we—can we leave the top down on the Caddy?"

Nick matched her grin. "Already down."

"Cool."

By this time, Myra had returned, camera in hand. She got off one shot before Nick walked toward her, his stomach turning at the thought of even more photographs being taken. Sure, they were family album photos, but time was beginning to teach him the folly of leaving too much evidence behind him. "Why don't I get a shot of you and Jenny?" he asked, reaching for the camera.

It was the right thing to say. Myra relinquished the camera without a murmur and, after another three or four pictures finished off the roll, he was able to get Jenny out the door and into the Caddy. She clipped her seatbelt in place carefully—Nick didn't bother checking, the very audible click meant that it was secure. Then, with a wave to Myra, they were off.

Jenny was very quiet and, oddly enough, very small in the seat of the Caddy. She still clasped the notebook tightly and Nick realized she was trying to be on her best behavior. "You can take the bow off, if it bothers you," he said, keeping his eyes on the road.

A quick glance allowed him to catch her frown. "It looks stupid, doesn't it?"

"No. Actually, it looks very nice."

"Well, it feels stupid." With genuine relief, she pulled the barrette out of her hair, letting the thin strands fall free. After a brief shake of her head, Jenny leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes, smiling as the wind whipped down over the top of the windshield.

"Better?"

"Oh, yeah. Thanks. But Mom—"

"We'll fix it before we go in."

"Okay." She leaned forward and eyed him suspiciously. "How'd you know? About the bow? Is that like . . . like how you break cases and stuff like that?"

Nick lifted one hand from the steering wheel and wiped the corner of his mouth with his fist, trying to hide his smile. "Well, I guess you could say I had an informant."

"Dad?"

"Now that's the thing about informants—you're not supposed to tell anybody who they are. But . . . no. It wasn't your dad."

Her eyes narrowed and she sat back against the seat, arms folded across the notebook. And, in the flash of a streetlight, Nick saw that spark of concentration in her eyes that he'd seen in Schanke's gaze time and again, when the detective grabbed hold of something that didn't fit and wouldn't let go until he knew why.

Nick realized that Jenny had given herself a mission—she'd try her best to find out who'd tipped him

off about the bow. And though he was pretty certain Natalie would forgive him if he let Jenny in on her little secret, it might be interesting to see just how far she got on her own. He turned his head, mouth open to say something, when he saw a truck barreling through the red light, coming directly at them.

He threw his right arm in front of Jenny, pressing her back against the seat, then gunned the engine and leaned on the horn. Traffic scattered at the sound, two cars behind and one beside him fishtailed across the road, but there were no collisions. And the truck blindly sailed through the light, despite the car horns and angry shouts.

Immediately, Nick reached for the hand mike to the police radio, as he slowed the car. A quick glance over his shoulder and he changed lanes, u-turning the car in the other direction. "Dispatch, this is Eighty-one Kilo, over." He glanced down at Jenny. Her eyes were wide. "You all right?"

She nodded, just as the radio sputtered, "Eighty-one Kilo, I read you—thought you were off shift tonight, over."

"There's a white delivery van, no markings, missed the plate, doing about ninety down—"

"Dispatch, this is forty-nine alpha," broke in another voice. "We've got Nick's delivery van and are in pursuit. Copy?"

"Copy," sputtered the dispatcher's voice over the radio. "Eighty-one Kilo, you copy that?"

"Got it," answered Nick, with a sigh of relief. He looked down at Jenny, who was frowning. "You need any paper on that van, I saw it take the light. Over."

"Will pass it along, Eighty-one Kilo. Have a sundae on me. Out."

Nick hung up the microphone, then glanced at his surroundings. He'd automatically followed the trail of the delivery van, but now that someone else was taking care of it—

"We're not going to chase him, are we?" asked Jenny, disappointment evident in her voice.

"Your dad would kill me if he found out I'd taken you on a high-speed pursuit."

"I wouldn't tell," she protested.

Nick gestured toward the radio. "Yeah, but *they* would. He could follow the whole thing from the station."

Reaching forward, Jenny touched the microphone lightly, then looked up at him. "Could I talk to my Dad on this?"

"Yeah." He winked down at her. "But I don't think that's such a good idea right now."

"I guess not. It's gotta be used for police stuff, right?" She jumped as the radio chattered again, loudly, but Nick reached past her and turned down the volume. "So you hear about all kinds of stuff on there?"

"That's how we keep in touch with the station when we're out," explained Nick.

"How'd they know we were going to get ice cream?"

Nick bit back any unkind comments about Schanke's inability to keep his mouth shut, saying instead, "I guess your dad told them."

"Yeah." From Jenny's lop-sided smile, Nick guessed she knew well enough what his words implied. "Dad's like that at home. And Mom says it's like having a second family, working with the cops."

"Well, your dad's proud of you. He talks about you at work all the time."

Jenny muttered, "I guess," under her breath.

Nick noticed that her cheeks had reddened slightly as she looked away. He tried to remember what that was like—to be a child whose parents were proud. It was so far away in the past . . . before his perfect memory. But was a faulty memory to blame, or not having something to remember?

He pulled the car into the parking lot of the ice cream parlor. Almost before he had the keys out of the

ignition, Jenny slipped out of her belt, unlocked the door and was half-way out of the car. "Hey," called Nick, picking up her notebook from the seat and waving it at her. "Forget something?"

Jenny walked over to his side of the car and sheepishly took the notebook from him. "Thanks."

Casting a quick glance over the parking lot, Nick smiled. "You like ice cream that much, huh?"

"Well, you know how it is," she said, in a world-weary tone. "You just get so wrapped up in thinking about one thing—"

He bit back a smile at the dismissive shrug of her shoulders and said with mock seriousness, "I know exactly what you mean."

"Like on Mom's bowling nights—"

Nick kept half an ear on her conversation as he opened the door to the ice cream parlor. Jenny walked under his arm and he followed her inside, then found himself blinking at the brightness. The walls and floor were covered with white or pale pastel tiles, from which the fluorescent lights beamed. Most of the small tables and chairs were occupied by adults and children, or groups of teenagers.

Jenny headed right for the counter. Head back, she peered up at the various pictures displayed. "How about a triple banana split?"

Nick stood behind her and looked down, meeting her eyes. "How about a cup of ice cream," he countered.

Her eyes narrowed and she frowned. "Dad finked on me, didn't he?"

Nick held up his hand and counted off the items, "One scoop of ice cream, hot fudge, sprinkles—*colored* sprinkles—" he amended quickly, as she opened her mouth to reply, "and no strawberries under any circumstances."

Jenny nodded, then looked away, but it was a momentary surrender. She pointed toward the display case. "Bubblegum ice cream, hot fudge, and colored sprinkles," she informed the man behind the counter. "*And* a cherry."

Nick made a face, gazing down at the pink stuff identified as 'bubblegum' ice cream—he was *certain* that color couldn't be found in nature—then nodded at the clerk. Schanke hadn't said anything about the kind of ice cream. And, despite the color, Nick was pretty certain that particular flavor had nothing to do with strawberries.

"Will that be all, sir?" asked the clerk, as he leaned down to scoop out the pink mess from the canister.

"Uh, yeah," answered Nick, reaching for his wallet. "Wait—" He glanced down at Jenny. "Something to drink?"

"Orange soda," she said, then turned and walked over to a table.

Shrugging, Nick repeated, "Orange soda—small," to the clerk. He glanced over his shoulder, back at Jenny. She'd seated herself, opened her notebook on the table, and was prying napkins from the dispenser on the table top. Her feet didn't quite reach the floor and swung freely.

"That's $2.25," said the clerk.

"Oh, right." Nick opened his wallet, removed a few bills, and then waited for his change.

"Cute little girl you've got," said the clerk, as he returned. He dropped the change into Nick's outstretched palm.

"She's—" He hesitated, glancing over at Jenny, the denial on the tip of his tongue—she's not *my* little girl. But that would lead to more questions than either he or Jenny needed, at the moment. Deciding to accept custody of the compliment, which would be passed along to Schanke later, Nick smiled. "Thanks."

Tossing his change in his pocket, he picked up the soda and the cup of ice cream and carried them

over to the table. Jenny beamed up at him, marker in hand, as he placed the cup containing the pink goop by her. Then he slipped into the small white metal chair on the other side of the table across from her.

"Thanks. Oooh, cool, *two* cherries." Jenny popped one into her mouth, tearing off the stem, then sipped from her soda straw. Her eyes narrowed. "Aren't you going to have some?"

"No," said Nick quickly. "I—uh—can't eat—" He gestured toward the pink goop in the cup.

"Oh, lactose intolerance," acknowledged Jenny. She pulled the cup of ice cream to her and dug the plastic spoon into it. "My friend Cindy at school has that—can't drink milk or eat ice cream or cheese. What a bummer! You should see her on pizza day." Then she glanced down at her spoon and raised it toward him. "Sure you can't have just a taste?"

He should have said 'no,' but there were those wide, helpful eyes . . . and a comment that Myra had made once about Schanke not being able to refuse Jenny anything came suddenly to mind. "All right," he relented, taking the spoon from her.

Once committed, there was no way out. She watched him like a hawk. And Nick forced himself to sample the ice cream.

It was cold—like him—and didn't turn to liquid quickly enough. Making what he hoped was an encouraging sound and smiling, he picked up a napkin and spit out most of it while pretending to wipe off his lips.

"Pretty good, huh?" asked Jenny, turning her attention to her ice cream.

"Tastes like . . . ." He started, suddenly realizing the flavor wasn't all that horrible *or* unfamiliar. "Tastes like bubblegum."

"Well, duh!" commented Jenny, laughing around a mouthful of ice cream.

He laughed as well, until she added, "And there's real bubblegum in here, too. Wait a minute and I'll dig you out some—"

"No, thanks anyway," said Nick quickly. "My—uh—dentist said I shouldn't."

"Yeah, I know." Jenny nodded sympathetically. "My dentist is pretty cool. But he's always cracking these stupid jokes. And he smells like mouthwash, you know?" She stuck her spoon into the ice cream again. "So, I guess Dad told everyone I was allergic to strawberries."

"Not *everyone*," said Nick. He looked away, finding it odd that he suddenly felt like he had to defend Schanke's reputation for loose lips. "Just me. And Nat."

"Oh. Okay." Seemingly satisfied with the answer, Jenny took a sip from her drink, then pulled her notebook closer to her. "You want to me do this while I eat? Or you want me to finish first? Cause I know Dad said I probably had to be home by nine, right?" She shook her head despairingly. "Sorry. You know how dads are. He told me not to ask you to run the sirens or turn on the lights, and to say please and thank you—" She looked up, suddenly alarmed. "Did I say thank you for the ice cream?"

"I think so," he answered, forcing a serious expression—when it was all he could do not to laugh.

"Oh, good. I forget that sometimes." Relieved, she sank back against the chair. "This interview stuff is hard work. There's a lot to remember."

"I'll help out," promised Nick, still trying to maintain a serious expression. "Go ahead and ask the questions. I'll try to think up an answer while you eat."

"Okay." Jenny peered down at the notebook. "Your name is—hey, I know this . . . Nick Knight."

"Nicholas," he corrected. Jenny picked up the pen, as he spelled, "N-i-c-h-o-l-a-s."

"Cool. My real name's Jennifer." She nodded, satisfied, then touched the notepad, as if looking for the next question. "Where were you born?"

"Chicago." There was no hesitation in the lie—boning up on his bio had helped him that much. But

he fidgeted as she wrote down the information. It somehow made him uneasy, having to lie to an eight-year-old girl about where he was born.

"Okay. That's cool—we're from there, too. I don't remember much, cause I was real small." She shrugged, smiled up at him, then looked back at the paper. "I can answer the next one—you're a detective with the Toronto Metro Police, just like Dad."

"Just like dad," he echoed. A shiver ran through him—this *was* making him uncomfortable. Either that, or he shouldn't have tried that horrifically pink ice cream. He leaned forward and pointed out, "There's another 't' in Toronto."

"Oh, thanks." Tongue between her teeth, she concentrated on fitting the 't' before the last 'o.' "Okay—that's three. Question four—what did your mom and dad do when you were growing up?"

The question startled him. He hesitated, then frowned. "What?"

"Well, like, what kind of job did your dad have?" Jenny dug her spoon into the melting ice cream thoughtfully. "Your mom probably didn't work. Mrs. Kurling—she's my teacher—she says most mom's didn't used to work real jobs. But they did stuff at home that was real important and was more like a job than the kind you do somewhere else—"

Nick looked away, only half-listening to Jenny's explanation. His mother . . . what *did* she do? When he saw her she was always busy; ordering servants, arranging meals, talking to his father, and, when she *did* get a chance to sit she was carding or weaving or doing needlework. He almost—almost couldn't quite remember what she looked like.

"Nick?"

He found himself staring at Jenny, then smiled. "Yes. She uh—what your teacher said. I guess you'd say she was a . . . housewife."

"Okay." She dutifully wrote down his answer, then asked, "And your dad?"

"My . . . father." His shook his head, as his mind flashed to LaCroix. No—not his master. LaCroix had been that, but *never* his father.

He remembered . . . he remembered a salt and pepper beard and a gruff voice. Blue eyes that laughed. Or grew stern. Or grew angry. A smack on his bottom when caught doing something wrong, a strong hand on his shoulder at his investiture of knighthood—there was pride in those blue eyes that night. Yes, he'd spent more time with his father. But even then . . . he'd really never gotten to know the man. That was the way of it, back then—to resist the yoke of authority until you broke free, became your own man. And only then could you go back and sit across from the old man on cold, winter evenings, and play chess and speak of politics and policy, crops and horseflesh, sword thrusts and ancient injuries.

He'd never gotten a chance to do that. LaCroix had denied him that opportunity, by making him reborn in blood and darkness. He'd never really *known* his father.

But Nick realized Jenny was watching him. When he tried to speak, he had to clear his throat before the words would form. "My father . . . owned some land."

"In Chicago?" asked Jenny, confused.

"No. Not in Chicago." He hesitated. "Somewhere else."

"So, he was a farmer?"

"Of . . . sorts. He raised horses." And armies, he added to himself. "There were forests, we cut a lot of lumber. And we raised crops."

"Cool." Jenny scribbled across the page. "You got to ride horses when you were a kid?"

"Oh, yes," he answered, grinning at her enthusiasm. "Almost before I could walk. Rode a lot. Fell off a lot, too, until I knew better."

"Could you teach me to ride a horse, sometime? Please, Nick? I wouldn't fall off. I promise."

There were those eyes again. And, behind them, a memory of his father, sitting behind him on a horse that seemed as high as a mountain. The ground was so far away, but there were strong arms to either side of him, holding the reins over his hands.

"I think . . . that's something your dad should do," he said, his voice soft.

Jenny frowned and stirred her spoon in the soup that was left of her ice cream. "I don't think my Dad knows *how* to ride a horse."

"Well, maybe I'll teach him sometime. Then he can teach you."

He was joking, but Jenny looked up quickly and nodded. "Okay. That'd be okay."

Nick raised a hand to his mouth, wondering how Schanke was going to get out of this one—Jenny would badger him endlessly. And the thought of a city-bred cop like Schanke on a horse for the first time . . . it was too cruel. "You, ah, have any more questions there?" he asked, squinting over at the page on which she'd been writing.

"Yeah. Uh—did you have any heroes when you were growing up?" Jenny looked up. "Like Batman and stuff."

"Batman?" echoed Nick.

"Yeah. You know. Batman." When he stared at her, she shook her head. "Come on, even you can't be *that* old. Batman's been around *forever*." Then, she leaned her head on her hand. "Dad said he used to like some 'Ranger' guy. 'Lone Ranger,' I think he said. He was a kind of cowboy cop and his partner was an Indian and they had cool horses and fired silver bullets."

"Yeah, I think he did." Leaning forward, Nick asked, "What about *you*? You have any heroes?"

"Me?" Jenny's eyes widened in surprise, then her brow furrowed. "Well, Batman, I guess. Some of the other kids like the Power Rangers, but Batman could beat 'em easy . . . even without Robin. And . . . I guess, my Dad."

Nick sat back in his seat, smiling. He wasn't sure whether to pass that one along to Schanke—the man had a swelled enough head as it was where Jenny was concerned. But his question had bought him a few seconds to think *and* given him an answer. "I guess my father was my hero, too. When I was a kid."

"Okay." Jenny scribbled on the notepad, turning the page as she wrote. "But, not even Dad could beat Batman."

"I don't think he'd have any reason to."

"No. 'Cause Dad's a good guy, too. And Batman helps the cops catch the bad guys. He just catches the worse guys that even the cops can't get." She nodded seriously. "And there are worse guys out there. Lots of 'em."

"I think your dad can handle them," he said confidently.

"Well, he can 'cause you help him, right?" Jenny smiled and looked down at the page. "There's only one more question. Okay?"

Still stunned by her last statement, he nodded.

"Why did you decide to become a police detective?" She looked up and sighed. "Like, was it what you always wanted to be when you were a kid? Or did you know somebody who was a cop? Or . . . was it like Batman, where bad guys killed your mom and dad and you wanted to make it up to them? Or something like that?"

Nick stared at her for a moment, then rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He wasn't about to tell Jenny that his original decision to join the police was to somehow help him atone for his past sins—for if anyone had ever been one of the 'worse' guys, as she put it, he'd be listed among them. "I wanted—I wanted to

do something . . . good," he managed, after a moment's thought. "I wanted to *help*, instead of hurt. Does that . . . . Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, in a way." Jenny wrote something down on her notepad. "You know, I'm awfully glad you wanted to be a cop. 'Cause you were there to keep my Dad from getting shot. He told Mom about it. He thought I couldn't hear. But I could. And I . . . I never got to say thank you to you. I told you I was real bad at that."

She'd kept her head down as she wrote, but there was something in her voice. Frowning, Nick reached over and touched her chin, lifted her head up, so that he could look at her. There were tears in the corners of her eyes.

"I think you hear a lot more than you *should*," he admonished softly. Then he made a mental note to warn Schanke that his daughter was overhearing some of the copshop he was passing along to Myra. Picking up a napkin, he passed it to her.

Jenny wiped her eyes, then blew her nose. "I'm not crying," she protested, through her sniffles. "Only babies cry. I'm not a baby. But . . . sometimes I get scared about Dad, you know? About the bad guys who are out there. Or the worse guys, the ones Batman fights. They could hurt Dad real bad, you know?"

"I know," whispered Nick, very seriously. "I know."

"But, then I think, 'Hey, Dad's got Nick with him. Nick won't let anything happen to Dad.'" She gave him a slight smile. "'Cause you'll take care of Dad, right? You won't let anything happen to him?"

"I won't ever let anything happen to him," he promised. He reached across to squeeze her hand and found her fingers very small and wet from her tears.

"Dad told Mom and me that if anything ever happened, we had to call you. 'Cause you'd make sure it's all right. And that's okay, but . . . you won't let anything happen to Dad at all. Not even the worst of the worse guys. Like Batman. You'll keep 'em away from Dad?"

"Just like Batman." Then he leaned back in his chair. "You know, your dad's pretty good at taking care of himself. He's saved me a couple of times. And lots of other people."

Her sniffles ending, Jenny blew her nose again, then handed him the napkin for disposal. "I know. Dad's pretty cool. But you won't tell him I said so, okay? 'Cause . . . you know how he gets."

"Yeah. It'll be our secret." Nick stared at the soggy napkin with dismay, then dropped it into the empty ice cream cup. "Ready to go?"

"I guess." Jenny closed her notebook and slid off her chair. She picked up her soda cup, threw it in the trash, then held the trashcan flap open as Nick dumped the rest of the refuse. "Did I say thanks for the ice cream?"

"Twice," he said, holding the door open for her on the way out.

"Good." Jenny followed him around to the passenger side of the car, then slipped into the seat as he held the door open and leaned on it. "Make sure you tell Dad I said thank you. That stuff's important to him."

Nick closed the door, then leaned into the car to check her belt was clipped . . . just in case. Rounding the front of the car, he realized his palms were wet and looked down—there was a faint trace of blood. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he hurriedly wiped the sweat from his palms and his forehead—he was more nervous driving Jenny now than he'd been on the way over, if that was possible.

Giving her a reassuring smile as he opened the driver's side door, Nick sat down and took a breath. Why should it be different now? He was fine. Everything went great. He'd almost survived having

temporary custody of Schanke's daughter.

But that much *had* changed, hadn't it? It wasn't like he could just hand her over to Schanke and never see her again. This temporary custody business, this 'date' had somehow become a commitment. One for which he didn't remember volunteering.

Then again, maybe he had. Schanke trusted him with Jenny, just like Jenny trusted him to watch out for Schanke. They *both* trusted him to care for one of the most important people in their lives.

Nick wasn't all that certain he trusted himself that much.

He started the engine, then looked over at Jenny. She'd opened her notebook and was looking at the notes she'd written—just making certain she'd gotten everything, he guessed. Noticing that there were slight tear stains down her cheeks, he reached over and dabbed lightly at the corner of her eyes with the sleeve of his jacket. "I don't want your dad to think I took you to a horror movie or something."

"'Cause I was crying?" Jenny smiled, eyes bright. "I *never* cry at horror movies. But Daddy does . . . sometimes. Especially the Godzilla movies. They get sad at the end. Or the movie with the big monkey—*King Kong*."

Nick matched her smile as he pulled the car out into traffic. "Yeah. Nat cries at the end of that one, too. Do you get that?"

Jenny shook her head. "Naw. It's just a big monkey. He can't breath fire or make friends with lots of other big monsters like Godzilla. But . . . I think King Kong's in one of the Godzilla movies. He swims away at the end."

"Have to mention that to Natalie." Nick stole another glance over at her. "You've asked me so many questions, I think I should ask you one."

"You asked me who my hero was," she reminded him.

"But you asked me a lot of *other* questions."

Jenny looked down at her notebook, then shrugged. "You're right. What do you want to know?"

Nick stared over the steering wheel, through the windshield. What *did* he want to know?

What was it like to live and breathe? To go to school and be allergic to strawberries and to eat bubblegum ice cream with sprinkles and hot fudge? To know what Godzilla was? To sit and watch a movie with your father and eat popcorn? To live in a house filled with love and adoring parents?

There were so many questions he wanted to ask, but they were all too much and too impossible for an eight-year old-girl to answer, right away. Jenny *would* tell him, eventually—he guessed from their brief conversation that she'd inherited the talking genes from Schanke's side of the family. But she'd also tell him in more than words alone—how she moved and how she laughed and what color flower she picked or which animal she liked at the zoo. That would take time.

He *had* time.

What he needed right now was *a* question.

"Don't make it too hard," cautioned Jenny, with a yawn. "'Cause I'm real tired from school today and my brain's not working right now."

"An easy one," promised Nick. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"*Very* easy." Jenny closed her eyes, leaned back against the seat and held her hands in the air, letting the wind wash over her. "Batman."

"Being Batman's already taken."

"Oh. Yeah. I guess it is." She opened one eye and peered at him suspiciously. "Do I have to answer right now?"

"You've got a long time to decide. So . . . I guess not."

"Good." She closed her eyes and leaned back in the seat again. "I mean, it's something you think about, like if Batman could beat Godzilla. But you don't really make up your mind for real 'till you grow up. 'Cause you can always be something else. If you want to change hard enough, you can always be what you want to be."

Nick took his eyes off the road for a second. She looked so confident, so *certain*, so serious . . . . "You really believe that, huh?"

"Yeah. That's what Mom says." Her eyes opened and she kicked her legs against the seat. "She knows that kind of stuff. She doesn't know anything about Godzilla, though."

He hid his smile and cleared his throat, concentrating on the road ahead. "Could Batman beat Godzilla?"

"Of course." Jenny's tone held so much childish disdain, he looked at her in surprise. "Godzilla's not *real*, Nick. Geez."

"Oh."

"Not that you're stupid or anything," she said quickly, reaching over to touch his shoulder. "I mean . . . Dad kinda thinks Godzilla's real, too."

"It's okay," said Nick, catching her hand and holding it for a moment, just to let her know he hadn't taken offense. "There's a lot of things I don't know. Maybe you could tell me about them sometime."

"Sure. That'd be cool." Jenny settled back against the seat with a satisfied smile. "Natalie told you," she said, after a second's pause.

"Hmn?" He glanced over at her. "What was that?"

"Natalie told you about the bow."

It was completely out of left field. Nick stared over the steering wheel and shook his head—he was right, she hadn't let it go. And he'd better take more care in what he said to her . . . just in case. "How do you figure that?"

"You said Dad told you about the strawberries. And you said Natalie—Dr. Lambert, but she told me I could call her Natalie," she explained seriously. "You said Natalie was there, too. And that Dad didn't tell anybody else. So if you were talking to Dad and Natalie and Dad didn't tell you about the bow, Natalie *did*."

There were holes a mile wide in the argument and the logic took curves that would have made the course at LeMans look like a drag strip, but she'd reached the right conclusion. Jenny was waiting, one eyebrow raised expectantly.

He nodded and concentrated on the road ahead. "Well, the thing about informants is you're not supposed to tell—"

"Nick!" she said, punching him in the shoulder. "That's not fair. And it's not like it's a real cop case or anything!"

Rubbing his shoulder, he decided Jenny had a lot more in common with Natalie than a shared hatred of bows. "Okay, okay, yeah, it was Nat."

Folding her arms triumphantly around her notebook, she grinned. "Knew it."

Shaking his head, Nick guided the car into the driveway, then suddenly realized he had no idea of the time. The fact that neither Myra nor Schanke were standing on the front porch of the house seemed to indicate they were at least under the wire, although—he saw the curtain on the living room window shift, as if pushed aside by a hand.

"Guess this is it," said Nick. Opening the car door, he noticed that Jenny wasn't so quick about leaving the car as she'd been at the ice cream parlor. By the time he'd walked around the front and to the passenger side, she'd barely gotten the seatbelt unbuckled.

Nick leaned on the passenger door of the car. "You have any more questions, you call me, okay?"

"Okay." Jenny tapped the notebook in her hand. "But I think I got enough. It only has to be two pages and I can write big." She slipped out of the car as he opened the door, then waited as he closed it. When he turned and before he could ram his hands in his jacket pockets, she slipped his hand into his and smiled up at him. "That was fun."

"Yeah. It was." Something tightened in his throat as he glanced down at the small hand in his. "Come on. I thought I saw your mother at the window."

Jenny half-walked, half-skipped, and he lessened his strides so that she could keep up with him. The front door opened as they reached the porch and Myra stepped out. "Hi, honey. You have a good time?"

"Yeah. Nick was cool. And he wouldn't let me have a triple banana split."

Myra met his eyes. "Oh—good. Nick, I can't thank you enough. You wanna come in for a cup of coffee?"

"No—really. I have to get back." He glanced down at Jenny, suddenly realizing that she was still holding his hand. "But, thanks anyway. Another time."

"Sure." Myra put her hand on Jenny's shoulder and pushed her gently toward the door. "You've got school tomorrow, young lady. What say we get washed up and ready for bed?"

"Yeah. Okay." Jenny tugged on Nick's hand and waved him down toward her. "Com'mere. I gotta tell you a secret."

Nick raised an eyebrow in Myra's direction, but she merely smiled and turned her head away. He squatted down beside Jenny and she threw her arms around his neck, then planted a kiss on his cheek. "Thanks," she whispered.

There were those wide eyes again. "We'll do it again," he promised.

"Okay." As he straightened, Jenny dropped his hand and moved toward the door. But then she paused in the doorway and looked up at her mother. "Mom, can Nick tuck me in, since Daddy's not here?"

Myra seemed startled for a second. She glanced over at Nick and said, "I think your dad will be back before that."

"But I'll take a raincheck," Nick said quickly.

Jenny nodded, then smiled. "Okay. See ya, Nick," she called, as she headed inside.

"Yeah." Half-heartedly, he raised a hand in a wave. "See ya, Jenny."

Myra leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, much as Jenny had. "Thanks, Nick."

"Anytime. I mean that." He dug his hands in his pockets. "She's a—she's a great kid."

"You oughtta think about having some yourself," said Myra sternly. "You're not getting any younger, you know. And it takes a lot of energy to keep up with them."

Nick coughed into his hand. "So I've noticed."

"But I think you did okay. Jenny doesn't give tucking-in privileges to just anyone, you know." Then she glanced up as there was a thump from inside. "I'd better get her ready for bed. And you'd better get back and check in with Don." She chuckled. "I think he's a little over-protective."

Nick glanced over his shoulder. "If I had a daughter like that . . . well, maybe I'd be that way, too."

"You think about settling down, getting married," pressed Myra. Then, she placed a hand on his shoulder. "Sorry—old match-making habits die hard. But if you get serious, I've got a cousin in Quebec . . . ."

"I'll keep it in mind," he promised. Taking her hand from his shoulder, he touched it to his lips, then released her. "Good night, Myra." Nick turned and headed down the porch steps, to the car.

"Good night, Nick." Leaning against the door, she called after him. "What a waste! My cousin would

just die if she met you."

"Very possibly," he said softly, beneath his breath. He only looked back when he heard the door close, then leaned on the Caddy door for a second. He felt . . . good. Still a little shaken, but . . . good. And he had so very much to think about . . . .

The sound of a car engine made him raise his head. Schanke's car pulled up to the front of the house. Nick started toward it, surprised to see Natalie get out of the passenger side. Smiling, she stopped in her tracks and pointed at him, "Look! He survived!" Then, when he smiled and shook his head, she added, "How'd it go?"

"Good. No problems." He pointed at Schanke as he rounded the car and walked toward him. "And I've got three things to tell you."

Schanke hesitated, glancing nervously at the house, then back at Nick. "No strawberries, right?"

"We got through that part okay." Nick reached out and pushed Schanke back, against the car. "*That's* for scaring the hell out of that little girl." When Schanke stared at him, Nick glanced over at Natalie, then back at his partner. "Jenny made me promise to take care of you because she thinks you're in danger every time you walk out that door. Which you are—but she shouldn't know about it. It seems somebody's overheard some of the things you've been telling Myra about work."

"Ah, geez." Schanke raised a hand to his forehead and took a step away from the car. "Aw—yeah. She has nightmares sometimes about that stuff. We figured it was part of being a cop's kid—I mean, Myra gets the cold sweats if I'm not home on time and forget to call to tell her I'm on a double shift." He turned quickly. "What'd you say? What'd you tell her?"

"That I'd watch your back and try not to let anything happen to you." Nick looked down, then leaned against Schanke's car and sighed. "I think it helped. A little."

"Good." Schanke nodded, glancing back at the house again. "I'll talk to her about it tomorrow. You're right—I gotta watch what I say around her. When she was a baby it wasn't so bad. But now . . . she *understands* things. It's really spooky, some of the stuff she comes out with."

"Tell me about it," commiserated Nick. Then, when Natalie shot him a questioning look, he pointed to each of them in turn. "And what are you doing here, anyway? You're off shift. And you're supposed to be covering—"

"Stonetree threw him out," volunteered Natalie. "Said he was driving him nuts. First, he knocked over the water cooler."

Schanke pointed at her, "Not true. It was wobbling. I just tried to fix it—"

"Then he broke the coffee pot at the main desk—"

"It slipped." He turned toward Nick, hands out. "You know that handle's broken, right?"

"And then when he set fire to—"

"Smoke. No fire, smoke—" corrected Schanke.

Nick rubbed his eyes with his fingers. "Yeah. I get the picture. Guess that means I'm back on shift."

"No, you're off for the night," said Schanke, with a sigh. "But I owe a half-shift. And a new coffee pot." Then, he smiled and nodded toward the house. "You said three things. What're the other two?"

"At the risk of swelling your already enormous head," Nick winked at Natalie, "Jenny thinks the world of you. Everything was dad-this and dad-that. Made me sick after a while."

Schanke adjusted his tie proudly. "Is that so?"

"Yeah."

"You *do* realize there'll be no living with him, now?" Natalie said, slapping Nick on the shoulder. "Come on, quick, what's the third thing . . . . before his head bursts."

Nick drew himself up proudly. "*I* have tucking-in privileges."

Schanke reached for Nick's hand and shook it, his expression serious. "Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"You realize that means you're on call next time we need a baby-sitter?"

"Dream on," said Nick, with a grin. "You're wasting time. I think there's a little girl inside, waiting for you to tuck her in."

"Yeah. There is." Schanke smiled. "Nick, I owe you one, okay?"

"Maybe you can pay me back. I'd like to take Jenny to a movie or something, sometime."

Schanke hesitated. "I was kidding about the baby-sitting."

"I know."

"Okay. I don't think Myra'll be too put out. In fact, she may start pushing you for the humanitarian of the year award. We'll set something up. Thanks again. Nat." Schanke turned and headed up the front lawn, to the porch.

Natalie moved to stand beside him, leaning against Schanke's car. "Let me get this straight—you're *volunteering*?"

"Yeah." He ducked his head, embarrassed, then shrugged his shoulders. "She's a good kid. And, after dealing with Lisa, I figure I haven't spent enough time with kids."

"So, you're dealing with this as an educational experience? Broadening your horizons?"

"I guess." He nudged her with his shoulder, then started to walk away. "We'd better get going, before Myra starts checking the front window again."

"Yeah." Natalie followed him back to the Caddy, then around the passenger side. As he opened the door, she paused, then sniffed. "You smell like . . . bubblegum."

"Taste like it, too." Ducking his head, Nick gave her a quick kiss on the lips, then walked away, heading for the driver's side of the car, watching her.

Natalie paused, one leg in the car, then climbed into the seat and shut the door. She sat up suddenly and pointed as he entered the driver's seat. "Wait a minute—you *ate* ice cream?"

"Yep." Nick slipped into the driver's seat proudly, closing the driver's side door.

"And you *swallowed*?"

He hesitated, then looked away. "Spit it out, actually."

"But you tasted it?"

The disbelief in her tone needled him. "Yeah," he answered, glancing over at her. "It's not important."

"It's a minor miracle. *Bubblegum* ice cream." Shaking her head in amazement, Natalie buckled her seat belt. "Maybe it *would* be a good idea for you to spend time with Jenny. Ice cream. Wow. Maybe I can talk her into setting you up with a burger."

He was pulling the car out of the driveway when she leaned down and picked up something from the floor of the Caddy. "What's this?"

Nick looked over, disinterested, then realized she was holding the white bow. "That's Jenny's. Wait," he put the car in park and held out his hand, "I'll run it in."

But Natalie moved it out of his reach. "I don't think Myra'll miss it. In fact—" she held it flat against her palm and ran her other hand gently over the loops. "Maybe you should keep it. With your trophies." Smiling, she met his gaze. "A symbol of a successful, non-fatal brush with responsibility."

"Yeah. Right." Still, he moved the gear back to reverse and headed out of the driveway. "Did Schanke really set fire to something?"

"He was right—it was only smoke. He was trying to pick up what was left of the coffeepot and put

some papers down on the burner." She chuckled and put her hand to her forehead. "I couldn't blame him, really. He heard your call about the drunk driver."

"Yeah. I'd forgotten about that."

"How'd Jenny get you to eat ice cream?"

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I dunno. It was . . . the damndest thing. She got me to promise to teach Schanke how to ride a horse."

"No?!"

Nick laughed at her expression. "Yeah," he admitted, after a second's pause. "It was something she did—she kind of gave me this look—"

"Oh."

There was something in the way she said the word. Nick glanced over at her—Natalie was back against the seat, idly toying with the bow. "What 'oh'? You know about this?"

"She gave you 'the' look," said Natalie. Wearing a faint smile she glanced away, out the passenger side of the car. "It's something little girls can do, sort of without thinking. Only seems to work on men, fathers in particular. I think it's part of natural selection, a survival skill. By the time you turn sixteen and the hormones kick in, it's about all that saves you . . . until you're old enough to get your own place." Turning back to him, she smiled and said with mock-severity, "Now that's a trade secret. Don't go spreading it around."

"Wouldn't think of it." He slowed the car at a stop sign. "You know, you didn't say what you were doing there. Your shift's over, Nat."

"Somebody had to keep Schanke from running off the road on the way home," she said lightly. Then, she sobered. "We parked a couple of blocks away. Talked for a while. Parent kind of stuff, until we saw your car go by and followed you in."

Nick checked traffic in either direction. "Your car's at the station, right?"

"Yeah." As he turned the car toward the precinct, she cleared her throat. "And I figured you might want to talk. Or just have someone around."

He glanced over at her, saw her smile, and something in his chest tightened. Trust Nat to know his moods better than he knew them himself. "Thanks. That—that's a good idea. Like you said, about this parent stuff—I haven't thought about my father or mother in . . . ."

"Years?"

"Decades," he said, with some small amount of shame coloring the word. "If then, even. Jenny asked me some questions about them. Other than trying to give sensible answers . . . I realized there was a lot I didn't know about them. Who they really were. What they did. What they felt."

He looked over as she rested her hand on his arm. "You aren't the only one."

"No." He managed a smile and reached up his hand to cover hers for a brief second, before returning it to the steering wheel. "It's just—I can't really remember what my mother *looked* like."

"That's right—no photos, no video—"

"No portraits, either. We weren't that—that *important*—for anything to have survived eight centuries." Tapping his finger against the steering wheel, he glanced over at her. "I think I'll paint a portrait of my mother. Maybe if I start it, it'll come back to me."

"Now that's a good idea."

"Yeah. It is." Grinning, he let his gaze sweep over the traffic. A car passed, with several children in the back seat. He caught himself checking his side mirror as the car pulled away in the opposite direction. "It kind of . . . makes me feel funny. You know, to think I'm on a list."

Natalie cleared her throat. "What?"

He chuckled again. "Sorry, just thinking about something Jenny said. Schanke told her and Myra that if anything happened, they had to call me." He shook his head, not quite understanding. "It's . . . funny."

"Nick, you've been around here a while. You know people, they know you. They trust you. You're on a lot of lists, by now."

"I guess." He shrugged, acknowledging the comment. "But—tell me if you think this makes sense. Schanke's got family—not here, but he's got family. And Myra's got lots of family, cousins . . . how many cousins?"

"I think she's related to half of Manitoba."

"Okay, so you know what I'm saying." He tapped his hand against the steering wheel again. "But Schanke told Jenny to call *me*. It's like, first there's Don, then Myra, then . . . me. I'm number three on the list."

"And that bothers you?" she asked softly.

"Scares the hell out of me."

Natalie laughed lightly and when he glared at her, shook her head. "It's called responsibility, Nick. Get used to it. *And* the fact that you've been informally adopted into Clan Schanke."

"Don't even joke about it," he groaned.

"They'll have you tossing back souvlaki in no time." When he raised an eyebrow, she added, "Hey, Jenny's got you eating bubblegum ice cream."

"I spit it out," he corrected. "And it was that 'look' thing that did it."

The precinct parking lot was empty enough so that he spotted Natalie's car quickly. Pulling up beside it, he threw the Caddy into park, then turned to her.

"What?" asked Natalie.

No matter how hard he tried—no, he couldn't imagine her as a child. "Can you still do that 'look' thing?"

She started, then smiled. "Well, gee, I dunno. It's been a while. Kind of a secret weapon, you don't want to abuse the power, right?" Looking down, she waved her hand at him. "No—wait—let me try."

When she looked up, there was enough of that wide-eyed, innocent, absolutely counting-on-you-and-you-alone-to-save-the-world look to send a shiver through him . . . as well as melt something very close to his heart. Her triumphant grin, however, ruined it. And Nick took in a breath between his teeth, hissing, "Geez, that's scary."

"You should see what happens when I *really* turn on the juice." Natalie put the bow down on the seat and unclipped her seatbelt. Her hand reached for it, but he got to the bow first.

Nick looked at it for a moment, then held it out to her. "Try it on."

She stared at him. "You're kidding."

"No. Really. Try it on."

With a heart-felt sigh, she took the bow from him and, looking in the rearview mirror, clipped it into her hair. She started to turn to face him, then quickly looked back into the rearview, startled. "Oh, God! It's even *worse* than I remembered!" He barely got a chance to see it in place before she ripped it off and tossed it at him. "Yuck!"

Nick fingered the stray hairs that had clung to the clip. "Sure you don't have any of those pictures around?" He looked up at her, half-smiling.

She looked away, then back, admitting, "Okay. So maybe one or two made it to the photo album—against my better judgment I may add."

"I'd like to see them."

"Yeah. Like in *this* lifetime." The comment ended with a derisive snort. But as she got out of the car, Natalie paused, hand on the Caddy door. "Maybe," she relented, meeting his gaze. "Sometime."

"Good." Nick nodded, then smiled. "Thanks for the talk."

"Anytime." She closed the car door, then moved toward her own car, fishing in her purse for her keys.

"Nat—one more thing?" When she turned, he cleared his throat. "Uh, if I'm going to spend any time with Jenny, I need to know about some things."

"Oh?" Curious, she took a step back toward the Caddy and leaned on the door. "Like what sort of 'things'?"

"You think—you think you could explain this Batman thing to me?"

And Nick wasn't at all certain that he shouldn't take her inability to stop laughing as a personal affront.

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